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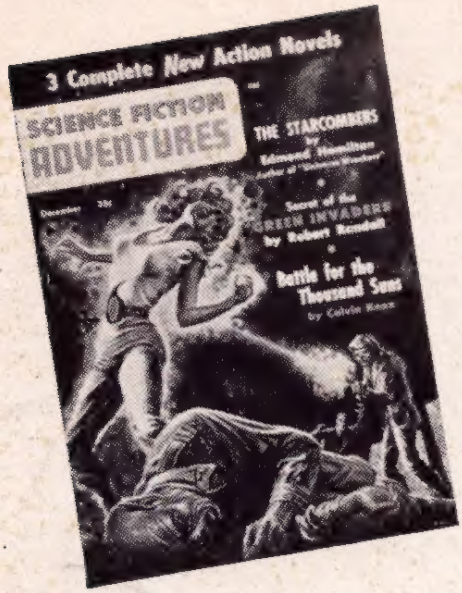
THE SUPERSTITION-SEEDERS

by

Edward Wellen



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SCIENCE FICTION

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ILLUSTRATIONS by Emsh, Engle and Stallman

Publisher—IRWIN STEIN **Editor—LARRY T. SHAW**

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INFINITY SCIENCE FICTION, published bi-monthly by Royal Publications, Inc., 47 East 44th Street, New York 17, N. Y. Single copy, 35¢; subscription (12 issues) for the U. S., its territories and possessions, and Canada, $3.50; elsewhere, $4.50.
Copyright 1956 by Royal Publications, Inc.
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Printed in U. S. A.

My sweetheart's the Man in the Moon

By MILTON LESSER

JEANNE turned off the radio and went downstairs slowly, watching how the gold-shot curtains on the landing window caught the sunlight in a multitude of brilliant flecks. She shuddered slightly. Up *there,* the sun would scorch and sear.

When she entered the living room, Aunt Anna looked up from her magazine, and Pop puffed on his calabash pipe, occasionally grunting with satisfaction. Mom looked at Jeanne hopefully, but soon turned away in confusion. She could not tell

Illustrated by STALLMAN

Not everyone will think of the first moon-flight as the first glorious step on the road to space. There will always, for instance, be the fast-buck boys like Lubrano . . .

whether Jeanne wanted her to laugh or cry.

"Well," said Jeanne, instantly hating the flippant way she tried to speak, "he got there." She never quite knew why, but whenever emotions threatened to choke her up she would slip on the mask, the carefree attitude, the what-do-I-care voice she was using now.

"All the way—*there*?" Aunt Anna fluttered her eyebrows, allowing herself a rare display of emotion.

Mom smiled, laughed briefly and nervously. She touched Jeanne's cheek tentatively with a trembling hand, hugged her daughter quickly and drew back. "I didn't know," she said. "None of us knew. We were afraid to listen. I mean, it's so far."

"Knew he'd make it," said Pop, tamping his pipe full with another load of tobacco from the humidor. "Tom's got good stuff in him. Smokes a pipe, you know."

"Not up there," said Jeanne practically. "It would waste oxygen."

"It says here in this magazine the moon is 240,000 miles away," Aunt Anna told them.

"Did the announcer say how Tom felt?" Mom wanted to know.

"Just imagine how it will be," Aunt Anna said, "when we get Tom back here and he speaks to the Women's League. We'll have to make arrangements—"

"Can't," Pop reminded her. "Government hasn't said anything about when Tom's coming back. Liable to keep him there a long time. Do the boy good. See what he's really made of, I always say. Andrea, your roast is burning."

Mom scurried off toward the kitchen. A moment after she disappeared, the phone rang and Aunt Anna took the receiver off its cradle. "Hello? Yes, this is the Peterson home. Yes, she is. In a moment . . . Jeanne, it's for you."

"Hmmmm," Jeanne chortled. "Some fellow trying to make time because Tom's too far away to protest." She hated herself for saying it, and administered the mental kick in the pants which never helped. She was missing Tom more acutely every minute. The distance was unthinkable, the moon almost too remote to consider, lost up there in infinite void, surrounded by parcels—parsecs?—of nothing.

Picking up the receiver, Jeanne turned her back to Aunt Anna, who appeared quite eager to listen to at least half of the conversation. "Hello? Yes, this is Jeanne Peterson. The *Times-Democrat?* I could see you today, I suppose. Why, here at home. I'm on vacation. But what—

about Tom? Oh, I see. Oh, they told you down at White Sands. Well, all right. 'Bye."

"It was a man," said Aunt Anna.

"Who said my roast was burning?" Mom asked them all indignantly as she returned from the kitchen.

"Who was the young man, Jeanne?" Aunt Anna asked.

Jeanne grinned, brushed back a stray lock of her blonde hair. "Sorry to disappoint an old gossip like you, but—"

"Tom *is* a long way off!"

"That was just Mr. Lubrano, a reporter on the *Times-Democrat*. 'How does it feel to be the fiancee of the first man to reach the moon,' he said. Funny, I hadn't thought of it that way at all. How does it feel? Did he expect me to turn cartwheels? (*But, I* am *proud of Tom, so why don't I admit it?*) He'll be down to interview me this afternoon."

"After dinner, I hope," said Mom.

Awkwardly, Aunt Anna lit a cigarette — something she did only on rare, important occasions. "It never occurred to me," she said slowly, trying to remove tobacco grains from her tongue as delicately as possible with thumb and forefinger. "Not for a moment. But Jeanne, in her own right, is also a celebrity. The Women's League has watched her grow up, I know. But suddenly, all at once, Jeanne is different. Andrea, get May King on the phone!"

"May—the president?" Mom wanted to know, somewhat awed.

"Of course, Andrea. A little imagination, that's what you need."

Mom got up doubtfully, approached the telephone as if it might jump up and attack her.

"Forget it," Jeanne told them. *Use big words. Use words which would have ridiculous double-entendres for them. Frighten them.* "I won't prostitute my emotional relationship with Tom for all the Women's Leagues in the county. Forget it."

"Jeanne!" said Aunt Anna.

"Jeanne," Mom echoed her, more than a little shocked. "What all this has to do with—Jeanne! Oh . . ."

But Jeanne was on her way upstairs to put on something gay and bright for the arrival of Mr. Lubrano. Now that she thought of it, she liked the almost electric crackle in the reporter's voice over the phone.

"GOOD AFTERNOON, Miss Peterson. Honest, I feel almost like a cub. In a few hours, you've become quite a figure." Mr. Lubrano was young, good-looking in a dark, dangerous, eager Latin way. He took Jeanne's

proffered hand, held it and looked at her long enough to let her know he appreciated what he saw, briefly enough to indicate everything would be strictly business if she wanted it that way.

Jeanne had been firm with Aunt Anna and her folks. Their part in this was to be strictly a vicarious one. She would answer their questions later. As it turned out, Pop almost had to propel Aunt Anna from the room, and this only because Jeanne had insisted beforehand. Mom couldn't fathom the fuss or the secrecy, and contentedly did as she was told.

"You're younger than I expected, Miss Peterson."

"Come now. Tom's only twenty-five. You know that."

"Well, then, prettier."

"Then we're even. After a reporter friend Pop once had, you could be Tyrone Power."

"Lovely dress you're wearing." He fingered the taffeta at her shoulder, let his hand rest more heavily than necessary. When she pulled away and sat as primly as she could on a straight-backed chair he said the one word, "Business?" He made it a question.

"Business."

"Just how long have you known the Man in the Moon?"

"The Man—really!"

"Oh, that's him. That's your Thomas Bentley. He's the Man in the Moon now."

Jeanne suppressed an unfeminine snicker. "About nine years. High school together, dates, going steady, engaged. The usual middle-sized town sort of thing."

"Love him?"

"Of course. Really, Mr. Lubrano."

For the next thirty minutes, Dan Lubrano asked her the sort of questions that might make an adequate Sunday-supplement feature. Nothing startling, nothing very original—except for the fact that Jeanne, as the fiancee of the first man to rocket across interplanetary space and reach the moon, was an unusual subject. Did she plan on marrying Tom upon his return? Naturally, but only the highest echelon of government and military circles knew when that might be. Was she afraid the utter desolation of space would somehow—change him? Lubrano made the pause significant. Might make him more romantic if anything, although Tom never tended toward stodginess. Could she be quoted as saying she looked up at the moon every clear night and called softly, silently, secretly to Tom across the unthinkable distances? Yes, if it were absolutely necessary.

When they finished, Jeanne said: "Don't tell me that's all, Dan?"

JEANNE
LOVES
MINK

"Officially, yes. Unofficially, I haven't started. Look, Miss Peterson—Jeanne—mind if I'm perfectly frank?"

Jeanne said she didn't mind at all.

Lubrano grinned, displaying his piano-key teeth. "Jeanne, all my life I've looked for something like you. Only it's something you almost never find. Either you're lucky or you're not. Me, I'm lucky, I've found the fiancee of the Man in the Moon. To make things even better, you've got your share of good looks—and you're not dumb, either.

"I don't understand."

"Jeanne, we can make a million bucks together. Quick, with hardly any work. Want to?"

"It sounds crazy, Dan. You're not making any sense."

"No? Then listen." He turned on the radio, waited for the tubes to warm up, dialed at random for a station. ". . . at this hour, we know only that the Man in the Moon has landed on Earth's far satellite, that he has signalled the success of his mission with a phosphorous flare, and that he has as yet established no radio contact, although that is expected momentarily. It is anticipated that the government will make an announcement shortly. This much is certain, however. In order to consolidate our position on the moon, we will have to send up another spaceman to join fearless Captain Bentley on our bleak satellite, eventually an entire crew of technicians—"

"Is that all?" Jeanne demanded. "Of course Tom is news. What's the connection?"

"News is right. The biggest since we exploded the A-bomb. Listen." Lubrano dialed for another station. ". . . dream of all centuries, all generations. A spaceship to the moon. The implications are so tremendous that man hasn't even considered all of them. American know-how, scientific ability and determination has once again brought a new era to mankind. Tonight before you retire, Mr. and Mrs. America, give a silent prayer of thanks to our Maker for giving us the Man in the Moon. This is—"

Lubrano flicked the dial again. ". . . presented by Crunchy Kernels, the cereal with the truly sprightly crackle. And here he is, ladies and gentlemen, in a direct interview from White Sands, New Mexico. Dr. Amos T. Kedder, assistant supervisor of electronics for the final stages of the spaceship's construction—"

"See what I mean?" Lubrano asked triumphantly, turning off the radio. "Assistant supervisor in charge of electronics. Well, a pat on the backside for him. Nobody yesterday, the feature attrac-

tion on the Crunchy Kernel Guest of Honor Show today. Startling, isn't it?"

"What's all this got to do with me?" Jeanne asked.

"Every place you turn," said Lubrano. "Can't avoid it. Honey, who wants to? Don't get me wrong. You won't just be my meal ticket. I'll have to do most of the work, but together, watch our smoke. A million bucks, honey! That's the goal. Want to get on the gravy train?"

"Maybe," said Jeanne. "But I still don't—"

"Look," Lubrano sneered. "I'm a newspaperman, struggling along at fifteen bucks a week over the Guild minimum. But I got ideas, honey. Public relations, that's the field. Public relations. There's millions in it.

"Get the right start and you got it made. We can't have Bentley here on Earth—tough. But we got his gal-friend. A red-hot item, if handled properly. Man! Commercial endorsements as a starter, then maybe a lecture tour, theater appearances, even cheesecake pictures for the magazines. Get it, honey?"

"Why, yes. I'm beginning to under—"

"Of course you get it! Jeanne Peterson reads *Cosmopolite* to while away her lonely hours. Jeanne smokes *Dromedaries,* relaxes in her bathtub with *Luroscent,* dreams of her lover on the moon on a *Softafoam* pillow, writes him letters and saves them for his return by using *Permablue* ink, wears a *Furform* coat to keep her warm while gazing at the crescent moon on chill autumn nights. Get it, honey? Get it?"

Jeanne laughed softly. "Talk about your prostitution," she said, half-aloud.

"Huh? What say?" Effusive with enthusiasm, Lubrano hardly heard her.

"Nothing. Nothing. It's been interesting, Dan." She stood up, led him to the door. "Let me think about it. I've got to think."

"Say, wait a minute." Almost, Lubrano seemed indignant. "You looked all hepped up about it, honey—why the quick freeze? If you think you can do this yourself without help from me, you've got another guess coming. I've got the contacts, you've got the name we want to sell. You can't do it alone. A fifty-fifty split, straight down the middle."

Mechanically, Jeanne's mind went to work. Also mechanically, she spoke. "Fifty-fifty baloney. You get twenty-five per cent, Mr. Lubrano, and not another penny. You must take me for a yokel."

"Forty."

"I said twenty-five."

"All right. All right. There's still enough in it for me. Twenty-five per cent. Meet me

tomorrow morning at my—"

"That's *if* I decide the idea is worthwhile," Jeanne said, pushing him across the door-sill and watching him retreat reluctantly down the walk to the street.

WHEN Mom and the others asked Jeanne later, she was the picture of co-operation. She told them everything about Mr. Lubrano and his pleasant interview. She told them nothing about Dan and his not-so-fantastic plans.

Jeanne excused herself after dinner, her mind seething with proposal and counter-proposal, and went upstairs to her room, but found sleep impossible. Was it fair to Tom, capitalizing on whatever feelings they had for each other? Was it fair to herself? If Lubrano had his way, a glorified Hollywood love would result. Jeanne and Tom would be adopted by the nation as its favorite lovers. Their faces would grace pop-bottles, sipping cola together in an infinite regress of progressively smaller bottles. Their forms would loll on all the beach billboards, proclaiming in the latest, brightest colors that the Man in the Moon and his girl-friend insisted on *Sunburst* bathing suits. And Jeanne would be waiting with her *Chlorogate*-toothpaste smile for her lover to return from the infinite distances.

When he returned, nothing would be left. Commercial love, exploited love, hounded love, a cheap, impossible, publicized and doomed-to-failure marriage, if Tom ever allowed it to go that far . . .

"Phooey on you, Jeanne Peterson!" Jeanne said aloud, and sat up in bed, surprised at the loudness of her own voice. She was imagining things. It wouldn't be as bad as all that. Exploitation for a few months—and a small fortune, if not the great wealth that Dan promised. And the physical comforts made possible by whatever she earned would, over a period of time, smother Tom's anger.

Still, the one honest emotional experience which somehow had penetrated deeper than the veneer she exposed to the world had been her relationship with Tom. . . . But she could make money, make herself happy, make Tom happy—if not immediately on his return then eventually. . . . But . . .

Soon after the milkman pulled his truck to the curb down on the corner, Jeanne fell asleep.

"HOLD IT! Hold it!" The agency director of photography, a small, round man with a thin voice, waved the photographer off his camera impatiently and scowled at Jeanne. "You're a nice girl, Miss Peterson. That's a nice nightgown, filmy, but not so

filmy it won't get by the censors. You got a nice figure and the country will love you. So why don't you be a nice model too?

"That ain't just a mattress you're on, Miss Peterson. How many times I gotta tell you that's the mattress you're waiting for Tom on? 'I miss Tom so, I'd never sleep, thinking of him so helpless and far away, the first Man in the Moon. Except for my *Beautysleep* mattress which induces sleep with its special innerspring construction.' I ain't no copy-writer, Miss Peterson, but it will be something like that. So, cuddle up on that mattress like it will have to do till Tom comes home from the moon. Cuddle nice, Miss Peterson, cuddle nice."

It took Jeanne exactly fifty-five minutes longer before she could cuddle nice. They then took the picture in a matter of seconds, and Jeanne was allowed to change into her street clothes. Hurrying, she was only fifteen minutes late for her luncheon engagement with Lubrano.

"Three months," Lubrano said, after they'd settled themselves over cocktails. "Not bad, honey. Know how much we grossed, including the *Beautysleep* account?"

"Yes," Jeanne told him. "Twenty-eight thousand, three hundred and four dollars."

"Not bad," said Lubrano. "It takes the right kind of press, naturally. That's me, honey, the right kind of press."

"Yes," said Jeanne. "We're a good combination, Dan. You're right, it can't miss."

"Funny, you never sound excited about it."

"Maybe that's the way I am. I don't excite easily. So what?"

"So nothing." Lubrano began cutting his pork tenderloin.

"What's next on the agenda?" Jeanne wanted to know. "Maybe I lasso the moon with smoke rings blown from *Buccaneer* cigarettes?"

"Maybe you do eventually. Not right now. Right now you have to hop a plane for New Mexico and have a chat with the boyfriend."

"What?" Jeanne felt something flip-flop madly in the pit of her stomach. "Dan! Oh, Dan!"

"That's right, honey. Through the courtesy of 'Hands Across the Ocean,' sponsored by Cleopatra Complexion Soap. A radio broadcast across a quarter of a million miles of space to re-unite you and Tommy boy. At least, for three minutes."

"Oh, Dan, Dan—that's wonderful." Jeanne stood up, removed the napkin from her lap. "If I hurry home and pack I can make a night plane and be in New Mexico by—"

"Whoa. Relax, honey, there's

no rush. The show is tomorrow night, 11 P.M. our time. I've booked your reservation for the morning."

"I'm too excited to eat, Dan. Really. But thanks for everything." Jeanne bent down as Lubrano prepared to attack his tenderloin again. She kissed his forehead playfully, turned to leave.

Someone snickered, "That's the moon girl, I think. I thought her boyfriend was way up there. Another cheap publicity stunt."

"Careful," Dan frowned. "So you're happy. Don't go around ruining everything."

Still smiling, Jeanne left.

"SIT DOWN, Miss Peterson." The general waved Jeanne to a chair, half rose as she seated herself. "Frankly, these publicity things always make me nervous."

"*You're* nervous! Look who's talking!" Jeanne waited while the general lit a cigarette. "Only three minutes! I can hardly think what to say."

"Is that bothering you, Miss? Don't worry. They showed me a copy of the script."

"Script?"

"Script, yes. For tonight's program. Your part is all there, word for word."

"But I thought—"

"That it would be extemporaneous? I guess we're both new at this, Miss Peterson. I would have thought the same thing. But not with an audience of twenty million. That's what Mr. Pate said. Pate, he's the director of the show."

"But—but they can't do that. I want to talk to Tom. I want to tell him—things. I won't recite any prepared speech." How ridiculous could the whole situation become? Jeanne thought. She'd made a farce of their love these months. Now she wanted to forget that, make up for it at least in part by speaking to Tom, by pouring her heart out to him (as if she could even start to do that, in three minutes). If that fell through too . . .

"You'd better send for Mr. Pate."

"You don't understand. Mr. Pate's in charge, not me."

"Then—then I won't speak at all. Let him tell their audience that."

"What? Why, Miss, you can't do that. They expect you on the show and—"

"Send for Mr. Pate." Suddenly, she was glad Lubrano hadn't come out here with her. He naturally would have agreed with Mr. Pate.

The general picked up a phone on his desk, dialed. "Afternoon, Captain. Have you seen Pate? What? Splendid. Of course I'll wait." He cupped a well-manicured hand over the receiver. "They're looking for him, Miss

. . . Eh? Hello? Mr. Pate? I'm sorry to bother you, but—yes, important. I wish you could come to my office, whenever you . . . Splendid. Splendid." The general hung up. "Be right here."

TEN minutes later, Pate arrived. He was young, florid of face, and looked like he'd soon have a bad case of high blood pressure if he didn't already have it. He waved a hand carelessly at the general. Too carelessly. Like he was a recently discharged enlisted man who felt he didn't have to bow and scrape any more.

"You're Jeanne. Recognize you anywhere. Like to tell your Tom he has good taste."

"Fine," said Jeanne. "Tell him anything you want. I'm not speaking."

"Ha, ha. Good joke."

"It's no joke, Mr. Pate. I won't recite any prepared speech. I absolutely refuse."

"Say that again. No, don't bother." Pate's brick-red face assumed the color of good claret wine. "Not ordinary, this. You probably thought we wouldn't reimburse you. Five thousand dollars all right?"

"Please, Mr. Pate. I came here to talk with Tom. I want to talk, not recite. Tear up your speech and I'll do it for nothing."

"Can't."

"Don't, then. Good-bye."

"Wait! General, can't you do something?"

"She's not under my jurisdiction. I told her you know your business and she was being—shall we say—something less than sensible."

"General! You never said anything like that. Don't you think I have a right to speak to my fiance?"

"There's something to what you both say." Now the general sounded like *he* was talking from a prepared speech. *If it's a matter of publicity, never hurt anyone's feelings. Straddle that fence. Walk that tight-rope.*

"Well, I'll be damned," said Pate. "Show's got to go on. Is that final, Miss Peterson?"

"You can bet your bottom dollar on it, as the expression goes." Jeanne almost felt like smiling, despite the situation.

"Don't say anything unprintable, then. Tear up your speech. We've got to. See you in two hours." Muttering a brief word or two, Pate left, not bothering to say good-bye to the general.

The general grinned professionally at Jeanne. "Any time I can be of further assistance . . ."

"Is THIS seat taken?"

Jeanne looked up from her third cup of coffee, which she'd been stirring nervously. She'd found a small restaurant outside

the post's main gate.

"Why, no. Sit down, won't you?" Jeanne smiled at the girl who approached her.

"Th-thanks."

Kind of a plain type, Jeanne decided. Not pretty, though certainly not homely. Nice hair, if you liked it corn-silk color and long. Some men did, she supposed. "Cigarette?"

"I—I don't smoke, thank you. You—you're Jeanne Peterson. I recognized you. My name is Mary."

"Hello, Mary."

"Miss Peterson, I don't know how to begin. But I've got to talk to you. You're a stranger and — Miss Peterson, please. You've got to do something. . . ."

"How can I help you if I don't know what you're talking about?" Jeanne almost felt like saying, *sister, I've got problems of my own.*

"It's Curt. Captain Curt Macomber. He's—maybe I shouldn't be telling you this. You won't say anything. I mean—"

"For gosh sakes, what *do* you mean?"

The girl sniffled.

"I'm sorry," said Jeanne. "Go ahead." Maybe she'd feel better herself if she heard someone else's problems.

"Curt is going—up there. To the—the moon. I still can hardly believe it. But they're sending him to join Captain Bentley. Tonight, at midnight."

"That's right, they did say something about sending a man to help Tom with whatever he's doing."

"Establishing a base, that's what. Curt told me. Curt said—he said he was going. He got two weeks of fast training and that's it. He told me the ship—the spaceship—worked automatically, anyway. Captain Bentley will brief him when he reaches the moon. Your Captain, Miss Peterson. But—but I'm so ashamed."

"Ashamed?" The whole thing sounded more and more like a soap opera to Jeanne every minute.

"Curt—Curt and I, we got married. In secret. His folks didn't approve and—well, that's not important. But I'm—I'm—well, I haven't told Curt. I'm going to have a baby. I can't tell him now, not when he's about to go further away than anyone. . . . Miss Peterson, please don't tell anyone." More sniffles. "Please."

"Forget about it. But I don't see where I can help you."

The girl spoke again, a quick-rushing torrent of words. "You can speak to your captain and find out what it's like on the moon and discourage Curt, or maybe even tell Curt the truth, that I'm going to have a baby and then he'll understand he can't go. . . . He doesn't have to go, he's a volunteer. I mean,

he can change his mind, if he wants to, if you can make him. . . ." The girl's voice trailed off plaintively.

Aunt Anna would be all for doing it, and then telling her friends the full details for the next five years or so. Pop would smoke his pipe and grunt something about it doing the boy good. Mom would say, "Whatever makes you happy, dear," and retreat to her kitchen. You could never predict Dan Lubrano. He might tell her to don a pair of football shoulderpads, tackle Captain Macomber and sit on him until the automatic spaceship blasted off for the moon. (Weller's football equipment, of course. Nothing but the best, nothing but a cash-on-the-line endorsement.)

"I'll do what I can," Jeanne said finally. "After the show, kid. Meanwhile, all you can do is take it easy. But I don't promise anything. Your Captain Macomber is a big boy now and probably, he'll make his own decisions."

The thought of a naive, innocent girl like the one sitting beside her falling into the publicity mill of another Dan Lubrano was almost horrifying.

"YESSIR, ladies and gentlemen. Every week at this time we all get together and join hands across the ocean—in Cleopatra Facial Soap's famous human interest program, the show that tugs at your heart-strings as much as Cleopatra Facial Soap tugs at the grit and oil, removing them from the pores of your skin—'Hands Across the Ocean.'

"Each week, Cleopatra Facial Soap extends a helping hand to men and women everywhere. Submit your story to us, and if it is judged a winner, you will speak with your loved one overseas—wherever he is, whatever he's doing—courtesy of Cleopatra. . . ."

Soon, across the distances that defied imagination, she would hear his voice—

". . . Your master of ceremonies, Laird Larsen. Here he is, ladies and gentlemen, the man whose voice all lovers know—Laird Larsen!"

"Hello, everybody, hello! Here we go again, in another Cleopatra attempt to make young lovers happy." Larsen, an unprepossessing man who spoke like Clem McCarthy, smiled mechanically. "This time, though, 'Hands Across the Ocean' makes an unprecedented leap. The Pacific Ocean is a goldfish bowl compared to the empty space between us and the moon. But Cleopatra Soap, in conjunction with the Amalgamated Broadcasting Network and the United States Air Force, will attempt to reach the moon tonight—by

radio. Here with us is the lovely Jeanne Peterson, who . . ."

On and on he rambled. *There was so much she wanted to tell Tom—*

". . . and on the moon, on the unthinkably remote moon, Captain Tom Bentley, alone on a wild, utterly unexplored frontier. More alone than any man has ever been before him. Lonely, perhaps a little terrified, although we feel our Captain Tom is made of sterner stuff . . ."

Our Captain Tom. All at once, it was sickening.

"Are you ready, Amalgamated? Very well." —appropriate tremble of the voice— "This is Cleopatra Soap, the planet Earth, calling Captain Tom Bentley on the moon. Cleopatra Soap and all its millions of listeners, calling the moon." Laird Larsen had picked up an unnecessarily complex microphone and was talking into it. "Earth and Cleopatra calling Moon. Do you hear me, Moon?"

But what could she tell him? "Just imagine what it will be like when Tom gets back here and speaks to the Women's League," said Aunt Anna. That? "They're liable to keep Tom on the moon a long time," said Pop. "Hmhmm," said Jeanne, "some guy trying to make time because Tom's too far away to protest." That? "I wouldn't prostitute my emotional relationship with Tom for all the Women's Leagues in the country," Jeanne said. Very funny. Tell him that? Tell him about Dan Lubrano?

"Cleopatra calling the Moon. Come in, Moon. Do you hear me?" Laird Larsen mopped his brow. "By now the radio waves have reached the moon and returned, ladies and gentlemen. But still, no contact with Captain Bentley."

Why hadn't she agreed to use the prepared speech? If she talked to Tom now, everything would be a lie. Nothing real. Nothing. And, she told herself, this would be one more step toward cheapening whatever they had. Twenty million people would gawk while they spoke. *Darling, I love you, I love you! Hooray!*

"Hello, Captain Bentley."

"This is Bentley." Tom's voice, faint, from far, far away —but unmistakably Tom's. It made Jeanne feel weak all over.

"Captain Bentley, I have a surprise for you. I have—"

Off in the wings, Mr. Pate stood, mopping his brow. The general was at his side, beaming.

"Jeanne? Did you say Jeanne?" Tom's voice, weak, so distant.

"Of course, Captain, Courtesy of Cleopatra Soap, the facial soap that . . ."

Jeanne wished he'd choke on all the bars of Cleopatra Soap

that had ever been manufactured.

"And here she is, ladies and gentlemen, America's number one sweetheart, Jeanne Peterson, about to bridge the gap of interplanetary space to chat with her lover."

Jeanne looked at the microphone and cringed. She walked forward, then paused. She stared once at Mr. Pate, still mopping his brow in the wings. Then she turned and fled, oblivious to the rising tide of voices behind her.

ALMOST midnight. If Tom hadn't spoken so often of the White Sands Air Force base, she never would have come in here, never found the little-used gate behind the barracks, where Captain Macomber would enter to avoid publicity, never have mentioned the right few words to the master sergeant at the gatehouse. *(If ever you need anything, darling, see Sergeant Reed. We were in Korea together.)* Sergeant Reed had been reluctant at first, but then had understood . . .

She crouched behind the gatehouse in darkness now and listened.

"But I tell you I'm Macomber!" the captain cried. "You've got to let me through. The ship's blasting off on automatic in a few minutes."

"Just show me your identification," Sergeant Reed said.

"I already—"

"Show it to me in the light where I can see it, Captain."

Jeanne ran down the runway that led past the little cement mounds of the observation turrets toward the needle-like shape which loomed up in the glare of a single floodlight. She had checked her wrist watch with Sergeant Reed's. Four minutes to midnight. Reed would delay Captain Macomber long enough. It was only a matter of minutes now. The sergeant would get a blistering chewing out, but could claim he'd only been doing what he thought was his duty . . .

He told me the spaceship worked automatically, the girl in the restaurant had said.

The spaceship's airlock was not secured. There was no reason to secure it. Jeanne found Macomber's pressure suit and with two handfuls of thumbs buckled it on herself. Footsteps pounded along the runway as she slammed the airlock door.

Seconds now. Less than seconds—

The last thing she told herself with a happy little smile, an instant before she blasted off in the second lunar ship, was that the Man in the Moon would get a real surprise in a little while.

∞ ∞ ∞

Stick close to your math and never go to space,

and you may become captain of an interstellar ship

—with a destination like the inside of an atom!

Detour to the Stars

by JAMES BLISH

Illustrated by EMSH

CHAPTER I

THE FLYAWAY II, which was large enough to carry a hundred passengers, seemed twice as large to Gordon Arpe with only the crew on board—large and silent, with the silence of its orbit a thousand miles above the Earth.

"When are they due?" Dr. (now Capt.) Arpe said, for at least the fourth time. His second officer, Friedrich Oestreicher, looked at the chronometer and away again with boredom.

"The first batch will be on board in five minutes," he said harshly. "Presumably they've all reached SV-One by now. It only remains to ferry them over."

Arpe nibbled at a fingernail. "I still think it's insane to be carrying passengers on a flight like this," he said.

Oestreicher said nothing. Carrying passengers was no novelty to him. He had been captain of a passenger vessel on the Mars run for ten years. He was second in command of the *Flyaway II* only because he had no knowledge of

the new drive. Or, to put it another way, Arpe was captain only because he was the only man who did understand it, having invented it. Either way you put it didn't sweeten it for Oestreicher, that much was evident.

Well, he'd be the acting captain most of the time, anyhow. Arpe admitted that he himself had no knowledge of how to run a spaceship. The thought of passengers, furthermore, came close to terrifying him. He hoped to have as little contact with them as possible.

But dammital, it *was* crazy to be carrying a hundred laymen—half of them women and children, furthermore—on the maiden flight of an untried interstellar drive, solely on the belief of one Dr. Gordon Arpe that his brainchild would work. Well, that wasn't the sole reason, of course. The whole Flyaway Project, of which Arpe had been head, believed it would work, and so did the government. Furthermore, there was the First Expedition to Centaurus, presumably still in flight after twelve years; if Arpe's drive worked, a new batch of trained specialists could be rushed to help them colonize, arriving only a month or so after the First Expedition had landed. And if you are sending help, why not send families, too—the families the First Expedition had left behind?

Which also explained the two crews. One of them consisted of men from the Flyaway Project, men who knew various parts of the drive intimately. The other was made up of men who had served some time—in some cases, as long as two full hitches—in the Space Service under Oestreicher. There was some overlapping, of course. The energy that powered the drive field came from a Nernst-effect generator: a compact ball of fusing hydrogen, held together in mid-combustion chamber by a hard magnetic field, which transformed the heat into electricity to be bled off perpendicular to the magnetic lines of force. The same generator powered the ion rockets of ordinary interplanetary flight, and so could be serviced by ordinary crews. On the other hand, Arpe's attempt to beat the Lorentz-Fitzgerald equation involved giving the whole ship negative mass, a concept utterly foreign to even the most experienced spaceman. Only a physicist who knew Dirac holes well enough to call them "Pam" would have thought of it at all.

But it would work. Arpe was sure of that. A body with negative mass could come very close to the speed of light before the Fitzgerald contraction caught up with it. If the field could be maintained successfully in spite of the contraction, there was no

good reason why the velocity of light could not be passed; under such conditions, the ship would not be a material object at all.

And polarity in mass does not behave like polarity in other fields. As gravity shows, where mass is concerned like attracts like, and unlikes repel. The very charging of the field should fling the charged object away from the Earth at a considerable speed.

The unmanned models had not been disappointing. They had vanished instantly, with a noise like a thunderclap. And since every atom in the ship was affected evenly, there ought to be no sensible acceleration, either—which was one of the primary requirements for an ideal drive, ever since that ideal had been formulated, long ago. It looked like an ideal drive, all right—

But not for a first test with a hundred passengers!

"HERE they come," said Harold Stauffer, the third officer. He pointed out the viewplate. Arpe started and followed the pointing finger. At first he saw nothing but the doughnut with the peg in the middle which was SV-1, as small as a fifty-cent piece at this distance. Then a tiny sliver of flame near it disclosed the first of the taxis, coming toward them.

"We had better get down to the airlock," Oestreicher said.

"All right," Arpe responded abstractly. "Go ahead. I still have some checking to do."

"Better delegate it," Oestreicher said. "It's traditional for the captain to meet passengers coming on board. They expect it. And this batch is probably pretty scared, considering what they've undertaken. I wouldn't depart from routine with them if I were you, sir."

"I can run the check," Stauffer said helpfully. "If I get into any trouble on the drive, sir, I can always call your gang chief."

Out-generaled, Arpe followed Oestreicher down to the airlock.

The first taxi stuck its snub nose into the receiving area; the nose promptly unscrewed and fell off. The first passenger out was a staggering two-year-old, as bundled up as though it had been dressed for "the cold of space," so that nobody could have told whether it was a boy or a girl. It fell down promptly, got up again without noticing, and went charging straight ahead, shouting "Bye-bye-see-you, bye-bye-see-you, bye-bye—" Then it stopped, transfixed, looking at the huge metal cave with round eyes.

"Judy?" a voice cried from inside the taxi. "Judy! Judy, wait for mommy!"

After a moment, the voice's owner emerged: a short, fair girl, perhaps 18. The baby by

this time had spotted the crew member who had the broadest grin, and charged him, shouting "Daddy daddy daddy daddy daddy" like a machine gun. The woman followed, blushing.

The crewman was not embarrassed. It was obvious that he had been called Daddy before by infants on three planets and five satellites, perhaps accurately now and then. He picked up the little girl and poked her gently.

"Hi-hi, Judy," he said. "*I* see you." Judy crowed and covered her face with her hands; but she was peeking.

"Something's wrong here," Arpe murmured to Oestreicher. "How can a man who's been traveling toward Centaurus for twelve years have a two-year-old daughter?"

"Wouldn't raise the question if I were you, sir," Oestreicher said through motionless lips. "Passengers are never a uniform lot. Best to get used to it."

The aphorism was being amply born out. Next to leave the taxi was an old woman who might, possibly, have been the mother of one of the crewmen of the First Centaurus Expedition; by ordinary standards she was in no shape to stand a trip through space, and surely she would be no help to anybody when she arrived. She was followed by a striking girl in close-fitting, close-cut clothes, with a figure like a dancer. She might have been anywhere between 21 and 31; she wore no ring, and the hard set of her otherwise lovely face did not suggest that she was anybody's wife. Oddly, she looked familiar. Arpe nudged Oestreicher and nodded toward her.

"Celia Gospardi," Oestreicher said out of the corner of his mouth. "Three-V girl. You've seen her, sir, I'm sure."

And so he had; but he would never have recognized her, for she was not smiling. Her presence here defied any explanation he could imagine.

"Screened or not, there's something irregular about this," Arpe said in a low voice. "Obviously there's been a slip in the interviewing. Maybe we can turn some of this lot back."

Oestreicher shrugged. "It's your ship, sir," he said. "I advise against it, however."

Arpe scarcely heard him. If some of these passengers were really as unqualified as they looked . . . At random, he started with the little girl's mother.

"Excuse me, ma'am—"

The girl turned with surprise, and then pleasure. "Yes, Captain."

"Uh, it occurs to me that there may have been, uh, an error. The *Flyaway II's* passengers are strictly restricted to technical colonists and to, uh, legal relatives of the First Centaurus Expedition.

Since your Judy looks to be no more than two, and since it's been twelve years since—"

The girl's eyes had already turned ice-blue. "Judy," she said levelly, "is the granddaughter of Captain Willoughby of the First Expedition. I am his daughter. I am sorry my husband isn't alive to pin your ears back, Captain. Any further questions?"

Arpe left the field without stopping to collect his wounded. He was stopped in mid-retreat by a thirteen-year-old boy wearing astonishingly thick glasses and a thatch of hair that went in all directions in blond cirri.

"Sir," the boy said, "I understood that this was to be a new kind of ship. It looks like an SC-Forty-seven freighter to me. Isn't it?"

"Yes," Arpe said. "Yes, that's what it is. That is, it's the same hull. The engines and fittings are new."

"*Uh*-huh," the boy said. He turned his back and resumed prowling.

The noise was growing louder. Arpe was uncomfortably aware that Oestreicher was watching him with something virtually indistinguishable from contempt, but still he could not get away; a small, compact man in a gray suit had hold of his elbow.

"Captain Arpe, I'm Forrest of the President's Commission," he said in a low murmur, so rapidly that one syllable could hardly be told from another. "We've checked you out and you seem to be in good shape. Just want to remind you that your drive is more important than anything else on board. Get the passengers where they want to go by all means if it's feasible, but if it isn't, the government wants that drive back. That means jettison the passengers without compunction if necessary. Understand?"

"All right." That had been pounded into him almost from the beginning, but suddenly it didn't seem to be as clear-cut a proposition, not now, not after the passengers were actually arriving in the flesh. Filled with a sudden, unticketable emotion, almost like horror, Arpe shook the government man off. Bidding tradition be damned, he got back to the bridge as fast as he could go, leaving Oestreicher to cope with the remaining newcomers. After all, Oestreicher was supposed to know how.

But the rest of the ordeal still loomed ahead of him. The ship could not actually take off until "tomorrow," after a 12-hour period during which the passengers got used to their quarters, and had enough questions answered to prevent their wandering into restricted areas of the ship. And there was still the traditional Captain's Dinner to be

faced up to: a necessary ceremony during which the passengers got used to eating in free fall, got rid of their first awkwardness with the tools of space, and got to know each other, with the officers to help them. It was an initial step rather than a final one, as was the Captain's Dinner on the seas.

"Stauffer, how did the checkout go?"

"Mr. Stauffer, please, sir," the third officer said politely. "All tight, sir. I asked your gang chief to sign the log with me, which he did."

"Very good. Thank you—uh, Mr. Stauffer. Carry on."

"Yes, sir."

It looked like a long evening. Maybe Oestreicher would be willing to forego the Captain's Dinner. Somehow, Arpe doubted that he would.

HE WASN'T willing, of course. He had already arranged for it long ago. Since there was no salon on the converted freighter, the dinner was held in one of the smaller holds, whose cargo had been strapped temporarily in the corridors. The whole inner surface of the hold was taken up by the saddle-shaped tables, to which the guests hitched themselves by belt-hooks; service arrived from way up in the middle of the air.

Arpe's table was populated by the 13-year-old boy he had met earlier, a ship's nurse, two technicians from the specialists among the colonist-passengers, a Nernst generator operator, and Celia Gospardi, who sat next to him. Since she had no children of her own with her, she had not been placed at one of the tables allocated to children and parents; besides, she was a celebrity.

For several courses Arpe could think of nothing at all to say. He rather hoped that this blankness of mind would last; maybe the passengers would gather that he was aloof by nature, and . . . But the silence at the Captain's Table was becoming noticeable, especially against the noise the children were making elsewhere. He *had* to say something.

"Miss Gospardi—we're honored to have you with us. You have a husband among the First Expedition, I suppose?"

"Yes, worse luck," she said, gnawing with even white teeth at a drumstick. "My fifth."

"Oh. Well, if at first you don't succeed—isn't that how it goes? You're undertaking quite a journey to be with him again. I'm glad you feel so certain now."

"I'm certain," she said calmly. "It's a long trip, all right. But he made a big mistake when he thought it'd be too long for me."

The 13-year-old was watching her like an owl. It looked like a humid night for him.

"I admire your courage," Arpe said, beginning to feel faintly courtly. Maybe he had talents he had neglected; he seemed to be doing rather well.

"It isn't courage," the woman said, freeing a piece of bread from the clutches of the Lazy Spider. "It's desperation. I hate spaceflight. I should know. I've had to make that Moon circuit for show dates often enough. But I'm going to get that lousy coward back if it's the last thing I do."

She took a full third out of the bread-slice in one precise, gargantuan nibble.

"I wouldn't have thought of it if I hadn't lost my sixth husband to Peggy Walton. That skirt chaser; I must have been out of my mind. But Johnny didn't bother to divorce me before he ran off on this Centaurus safari. That was a mistake. I'm going to haul *him* back by his *scruff*."

She folded the rest of the bread and snapped it delicately in two. The 13-year-old winced and looked away.

"I'm scared to death of this bloated coffin of yours," she said conversationally. "But what the hell, I'm dead anyhow. On Earth, everybody knows I can't stay married two years, no matter how many fan letters I get. Or how many proposals, decent or natural. It's no good to me any more that three million men say they love me. I know what they mean. Every time I take one of them up on it, he vanishes."

The folded snippet of bread disappeared without a sound.

"*This* man I'm going to hold, if I have to chase him all over the galaxy," she said. "I'll teach him to run away from *me* without making it legal first."

Celia's fork stabbed a heart of lettuce out of the Lazy Spider and turned it in the gout of Russian dressing the Spider had shot into the air after it. "What does he think he got himself into, anyhow—the Foreign Legion?" she asked nobody in particular. "*Him?* He couldn't find his way out of a supermarket without a map."

Arpe was gasping like a fish. The girl was smiling warmly at him, from the midst of a cloud of musky perfume against which the ship's ventilators labored in vain. He had never felt less like the captain of a great ship. In another second, he would be squirming; he was already blushing.

"Sir—"

It was Oestreicher, bending at his ear. Arpe almost broke his tether with gratitude. "Yes, Mr. Oestreicher?"

"We're ready to start dogging down. If you could excuse yourself, we're needed on the bridge."

"Very good. Ladies and gentlemen, please excuse me; I have duties. I hope you'll see the dinner through, and have a good time."

"Is something wrong?" Celia Gospardi said, looking directly into his eyes. His heart went *boomp!* like a form-stamper.

"Nothing wrong," Oestreicher said smoothly from behind him. "There's always work to do in officers' country. Ready, Captain?"

Arpe kicked himself away from the table into the air, avoiding a floating steward only by a few inches. Oestreicher caught up with him in time to prevent his running head-on into the side of the bulkhead.

"We've allowed two hours for the passengers to finish eating and bed down," Oestreicher reported in the control room. "Then we'll start building the field. You're sure we don't need any preparations against acceleration?"

Arpe was recovering; now that the questions were technical, he knew where he was. "No, none at all. The field doesn't mean a thing while it's building. It has to reach a threshold before it takes effect. Once it crosses that point on the curve, it takes effect totally, all at once. Nobody should feel a thing."

"Good. Then we can hit the hammocks for a few hours. I suggest, sir, that Mr. Stauffer take the first watch; I'll take the second; that will leave you in command when the drive actually fires, if it can be delayed that long."

"It can be delayed as long as we like. It won't cross the threshold until we close that key."

"That was my understanding," Oestreicher said. "Very good, sir. Then let's stand the usual watches and get under way at the usual time. It would be best to observe normal routine, right up to the minute when the voyage itself becomes unavoidably abnormal."

He was right, as usual. Arpe could do nothing but nod, though he did not expect to sleep. The bridge emptied, except for Stauffer, and the ship quieted.

In the morning, while the passengers were still asleep, the key closed.

The *Flyaway II* vanished without a sound.

CHAPTER II

MOMMY mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy

I dream I see him Johnny I love you he's going down the ladder into the pit and I can't follow and he's gone already and it's time for the next act

Spaceship. I'm flying it and Bobby can see me and all the people.

Some kind of emergency, but why not the alarms? Got to ring Stauffer

Daddy? Daddy? Bye-bye-see-you? Daddy?

Where's the bottle I knew I shouldn't have gotten sucked into that game

Falling falling why can't I stop falling will I die if I stop

Two point eight three four. Two point eight three four. I keep thinking two point eight three four that's what the meter says two point eight three four

Johnny don't go I'm riding an elephant and he's trying to go down the ladder and it's going to break

No alarms. All well. But can't think. Can't mommy ladder spaceship think for bye-bye-see-you two daddy bottle seconds straight. What's the bottle trouble game matter anyhow? Where's that two point eight three four physicist, what's-his-name, Daddy, Johnny, Arpe?

Will I die if I stop?

I love you

mommy

Two point

STOP. STOP. Arpe. Arpe. Where are you? Everyone else, stop thinking. STOP. *We're reading each others' minds.* Everyone try to stop before we go nuts. Arpe, come to the bridge. Arpe, do you hear me?

I hear you. I'm on my way.

You there at the field-tension meter, hold it at 2.834. Concentrate, try not to pay attention to anything else. You people with children, try to soothe them, bed them down again.

AS THE second officer's powerful personality took hold, the raging storm of impressions and emotions subsided gradually to a sort of sullen background sea of fear, marked with fleeting whitecaps of hysteria, and Arpe found himself able to think his own thoughts again. There was no doubt about it: everyone on board the *Flyaway II* had become suddenly and totally telepathic.

But what could be the cause? It couldn't be the field. Not only was there nothing in the theory to account for it, but the field had already been effective for several hours, at this same intensity, without producing any such pandemonium.

"My conclusion also," Oestreicher said as Arpe came onto the bridge. "Also you'll notice that we can now see out of the ship, and that the instruments to outside are registering again. Neither of those things was true up to a few minutes ago; we went blind as soon as the threshold was crossed."

"Then what's the alternative?" Arpe said. He found that it helped to speak aloud; it diverted him from the undercurrent of the intimate thoughts of every-

one else. "It must be characteristic of the space we're in, then, wherever that is. Any clues?"

"There's a sun outside," Stauffer said, "and it has planets. I'll have the figures for you in a minute. This I can say right away, though: It isn't Alpha Centauri. Too dim."

Somehow, Arpe hadn't expected it to be. Alpha Centauri was in normal space, and this was obviously anything but normal. He caught the figures as they surfaced in Stauffer's mind: diameter of primary—about a thousand miles (could that possibly be right? Yes, it was correct. But incredible). Number of planets—fourteen. Diameter of outermost planet—about a thousand miles; distance from primary—about 50,000,000 miles.

"What kind of a screwy system is this?" Stauffer protested. "It's dynamically impossible."

It certainly was, and yet it was naggingly familiar. Gradually the truth began to dawn on him. He suppressed it temporarily, partly to see whether or not it was possible to conceal a thought from the others under these circumstances.

"Check the inner orbital distances, Mr. Stauffer. There should be only three altogether."

"Three? For fourteen planets?"

"Yes. Eight of them should be at the same distance, plus two inside, plus four at the fifty million mile distance."

"Great Scott," Oestreicher said. "Don't tell me we've gotten ourselves inside an atom, sir!"

"Looks like it. Tell me, Mr. Oestreicher, did you get that from me, or derive it from what I said?"

"I doped it out," Oestreicher said, puzzled.

"Good, now we know something else: it *is* possible to suppress a thought in this medium. I've been holding the thought 'carbon atom' just below the level of my consciousness for several minutes."

Oestreicher frowned, and thought: *That's good to know, it increases the possibility of controlling panic and . . .* Slowly, like a sinking ship, the rest of the thought went under. The second officer was practicing.

"You're right about the planets, sir," Stauffer reported. "I suppose this means that they'll all turn out to be the same size, and that there'll be no ecliptic, either."

"Necessarily. They're electrons. That 'sun' is the nucleus."

"But how did it happen?" Oestreicher demanded.

"I can only guess. The field gives us negative mass. We've never encountered negative mass in nature anywhere but in the microcosm. Evidently that's the only realm where it can exist—

ergo, as soon as we attained negative mass, we were collapsed into the microcosm."

"Great," Oestreicher grunted. "Can we get out, sir?"

"I don't know. Positive mass is allowable in the microcosm, so if we turned off the field, we might just stay here. We'll have to study it out. What interests me more right now is this telepathy; there must be some rationale for it."

He thought about it. Until now, he had never believed in telepathy at all; its reported behavior in the macrocosm had been so contrary to all known physical laws that it had been easier to assume that it didn't exist. But the laws of the macrocosm didn't apply down here; this was the domain of quantum mechanics, though telepathy didn't obey that scholium either. Was it possible that the "parapsychological" fields were a part of the fine structure of this universe, as this universe itself was the fine structure of the macrocosm? If so, any psi effects that turned up in the macrocosm would be traces only, a leakage or residium, fleeting and wayward. . . .

Oestreicher, he noticed, was following his reasoning with considerable interest. "I'm not used to thinking of electrons as having any fine structure," he said.

"Well, all the atomic particles have spin, and to measure that, you have to have some kind of a point being translated from one place to another. Anyhow, the analogy's established now—all we have to do is look out the port."

"Can we land on one of those things, sir?" Stauffer asked.

"I should think so," Arpe said, "if you think there's something to be gained by it. I'll leave that up to Mr. Oestreicher."

"Why not?" Oestreicher said, adding, to Arpe's surprise, "The research chance alone oughtn't to be passed up."

Suddenly, the background of fear, which Arpe had more and more become able to ignore, began to swell ominously; huge combers of pure panic were beginning to race over it. "Oof," Oestreicher said. "We forgot that they could pick up every word we said. And they don't like the idea."

They didn't. Individual thoughts were hard to catch, but the main tenor was plain. These people had signed up to go to Centaurus, and that was where they wanted to go. The good possibility that they were trapped on the atomic level was terrifying enough, but taking the further risk of landing on an electron—

One thread of pure terror lifted above the mass. It was Celia

Gospardi; she had just awakened, and her shell of bravado had been stripped completely. Following that soundless scream, the combers of panic became higher, more rapid—

"We'll have to do something about that woman," Oestreicher said tensely. Arpe noted with interest that he was masking the thought he was speaking, quite a difficult technical trick; he tried to mask it also in the reception. "She's going to throw the whole ship into an uproar. You were talking to her at some length last night, sir; maybe you'd better try."

"All right," Arpe said reluctantly, taking a step toward the door. "I gather she's still in her—"

Flup!

Celia Gospardi *was* in her stateroom.

So was Capt. Arpe.

SHE stifled a small vocal scream as she recognized him. "Don't be alarmed," he said quickly, though he was almost as alarmed as she was. "Listen, Mr. Oestreicher and everybody else: be careful about making any sudden movements with some definite destination in mind. You're likely to arrive there without having crossed the intervening space. It's a characteristic of the space we're in."

I read you, sir. So teleportation is an energy level jump? That could be nasty, all right.

"It's—nice of you—to try to —quiet me," the girl said timidly. Arpe noticed covertly that she had not acquired the trick of masking. He would have to be careful in what he said, for she would effectively make every word known. It was too bad, in a way. Attractive as she was in her public role, she was downright beautiful when frightened.

"Please do try to keep a hold on yourself, Miss Gospardi," he said. "There really doesn't seem to be any immediate danger. The ship is sound and her mechanisms are all operating as they should. We have supplies for a full year, and unlimited power; we ought to be able to get away. There's nothing to be frightened about."

"I can't help it," she said desperately. "I can't even think straight. My thoughts keep getting all mixed up with everybody else's."

"We're all having that trouble to some extent," Arpe said. "If you concentrate, you'll find that you can filter the other thoughts out about ninety per cent. And you'll have to try, because if you remain frightened you'll panic other people—especially the children. They're defenseless against adult emotions even *without* telepathy."

"I—I'll try."

"Good for you." With a slight smile, he added, "After all, if you think as little of your fifth husband as you say, you should welcome a little delay en route."

It was entirely the wrong thing to say. At once, way down at the bottom of her mind, a voice cried out in soundless anguish: *But I love him!*

She burst into tears. Helplessly, Arpe left. It was not at all the way he had hoped the interview would end, but perhaps it was better to leave her grief-stricken than panic-stricken. Of course, if she broadcast her grief all over the ship, there were plenty of other people to receive it, people who had causes for grief as real as hers.

"Grief inactivates," Oestreicher said as Arpe re-entered the bridge. "Even at its worst, it doesn't create riots. Cheer up, sir. I couldn't have done any better, I'm sure of that."

"Thank you, Mr. Oestreicher. What's the program now? I feel some weight."

"We're making a rocket approach to the nearest electron, and seem to be moving. Evidently the Third Law of Motion isn't invalid down here."

"Which is a break," Stauffer said gloomily. "Incidentally, what are we seeing by? Gamma waves? Space itself doesn't seem to be dark here."

"Gamma waves are too long," Arpe said. "Probably de Broglie waves. The illuminated sky is probably a demonstration of Obler's Paradox: it's how *our* space would look if the stars were evenly scattered throughout. That makes me think we must be inside a fairly large body of matter. And the nearest one was SV-One."

"Oh-ho," Stauffer said. "And what happens to us when a cosmic ray primary comes charging through here?"

Arpe grinned. "You've got the answer to that already. Have you detected any motion in this electron we're approaching?"

"Not much—just of the expectable planetary orbital size."

"Which wouldn't be expectable at all unless we were living on an enormously accelerated time scale. By our home time scale we haven't been here a billionth of a second yet. We could spend the rest of our lives here without seeing a neutron or a cosmic primary."

They fell silent as the little world grew gradually in the ports. There was no visible surface detail, and the albedo was high. As they came closer, the reasons for both became evident, for with each passing moment the outlines of the body grew fuzzier. It seemed to be imbedded in a sort of thick haze.

"Close enough," Oestreicher

said. "We can't land the *Flyaway* anyhow; we'll have to put a couple of people off in a tender. Any suggestions, sir?"

"I'm going," Arpe said immediately. "I wouldn't miss an opportunity like this for anything."

"Can't blame you, sir," Oestreicher said. "But that body doesn't look like it has any solid core; what if you just sank right through to the center?"

"That's not likely," Arpe said. "I've got a small increment of negative mass, and I'll retain it by picking up the ship's field with an antenna. The electron's light, but what mass it has is positive; in other words, it will repel me slightly. I won't sink far."

"Well, who's to go with you?" Oestreicher said. "One trained observer should be enough, but you'll need an anchor man. How about Miss Gospardi? It'll give her something to think about—and take an incipient panic center out of the ship long enough to let the other people calm down."

"Good enough," Arpe said. "Mr. Stauffer, order the gig broken out."

CHAPTER III

THE little world had a solid surface, after all, though it blended so gradually into the glittering haze of its atmosphere that it was very hard to see. Arpe and the girl seemed to be walking waist-deep in some swirling, opalescent substance that was bearing a colloidal metallic dust, like minute sequins. The faint repulsion against their spacesuits could not be felt as such; it seemed instead as though they were walking in a gravitational field about a tenth that of the Earth.

"It's terribly quiet," Celia said.

The suit radios, Arpe noted, were not working. Luckily, the thought-carrying properties of the medium around them were unchanged.

"I'm not at all sure that this stuff would carry sound," he answered. "It isn't a gas as we know it, anyhow. It's simply an expression of indefiniteness. The electron never knows exactly where it is; just trails off into not being anywhere at its boundaries."

"Well, it's eerie. How long do we have to stay here?"

"Not long. I just want to get some idea of what it's like."

He bent over. The surface, he saw, was covered with fine detail, though again he was unable to make much sense of it. Here and there he saw tiny, crooked rills of some brilliantly shiny substance, rather like mercury, and—yes, there was an irregular puddle of it, and it showed a

definite meniscus. When he pushed his finger into it, the puddle dented deeply, but it did not break and wet his glove. Its surface tension must be enormous; he wondered if it were made entirely of identical subfundamental particles. The whole globe seemed to be covered by a network of these shiny threads.

Now that his eyes were becoming acclimated, he saw that the "air," too, was full of these shining veins, making it look distinctly marbled. The veins offered no impediment to their walking; somehow, there never seemed to be any in their immediate vicinity, though there were always many of them just ahead. As the two moved, their progress seemed to be accompanied by vagrant, small emotional currents, without visible cause or source, too fugitive to identify.

"What is that silvery stuff?" Celia demanded fearfully.

"Celia, I haven't the faintest idea. What kind of particle could possibly be submicroscopic to an electron? It'd take a century of research right here on the spot to work up even an educated guess. This is all strange and new, utterly outside any experience man has ever had. I doubt that any words exist to describe it accurately."

The ground, too, seemed to vary in color. In the weak light it was hard to tell what the colors were. The variations appeared as shades of gray, with a bluish or greenish tinge here and there.

The emotional waves became a little stronger, and suddenly Arpe recognized the dominant one. It was pain.

On a hunch, he turned suddenly and looked behind him. A twin set of broad black bootprints, as solid and sharply defined as if they had been painted, were marked out on the colored patches.

"I don't like the look of that," he said. "Our ship itself is almost of planetary mass in this system, and we're far too big for this planet. How do we know what all this fine detail means? But we're destroying it wherever we step, all the same. Forests, cities, the cells of some organism, something unguessable—we've got to go back right now."

"Believe me, I'm willing," the girl said.

The oldest footprints, those that they had made beside the tender, were beginning to grow silvery at the edges, as though with hoarfrost, or with whatever fungus might attack a shadow. Or was it seepage of the same substance that made up the rills? Conjecture multiplied endlessly without answer here. Arpe hated to think of the long oval blot the tender would leave behind on the landscape. He could only

hope that the damage would be self-repairing.

He lifted the tender quickly and took it out of the opalescent atmosphere with a minimum of ceremony, casting ahead, for guidance, to pick up the multifarious murmur of the minds on board the *Flyaway II*.

Only when he noticed that he was searching the sky visually for the ship did he realize that he was not getting anything.

"Celia? You can hear me all right telepathically, can't you?"

"Clear as a bell. It makes me feel much better, Captain."

"Then what's wrong with the ship? I don't pick up a soul."

She frowned. "Why, neither do I. What—"

Arpe pointed ahead. "There she is, right where we left her. We could hear them all well enough at this distance when we were on the way down. Why can't we now?"

He gunned the tender, all caution forgotten. His arrival in the *Flyaway II*'s airlock was noisy, and he lost several minutes jockeying the little boat into proper seal. They both fell out of it in an inelegant scramble.

There was nobody on board the *Flyaway II*. Nobody but themselves.

THE telepathic silence left no doubt in Arpe's or Celia's mind, but they searched the huge vessel thoroughly to make sure. It was deserted.

"Captain!" Celia cried. Her panic was coming back full force. "What happened? Where could they have gone? There isn't anyplace—"

"I don't know. Calm down a minute, Celia, and let me think." He sat down on a stanchion and stared blindly at the hull for a moment. Then he got up and went back to the bridge, with the girl clinging desperately to his elbow.

Everything was in order. It was as if the whole ship had been deserted simultaneously in an instant. Oestreicher's pipe sat smugly in its clip by the chart board. The bowl was still hot.

"It can't have happened more than half an hour ago," he whispered. "As if they all did a jump at once—like the one that put me in your stateroom. But where to?"

Suddenly it dawned on him. There was only one answer.

"What is it?" Celia cried. "I can see what you're thinking, but it doesn't make sense!"

"It makes perfect sense—in *this* universe," he said grimly. "Celia, we're going to have to work fast, before Oestreicher makes some stab in the dark that might be irrevocable. Luckily everything's running just as though the crew were still here to tend it, so maybe two of us

will be enough to swing it. But you're going to have to follow instructions fast, accurately, and without stopping for an instant to ask questions."

"What are you going to do?"

"Shut down the field. No, don't protest, you haven't the faintest idea what that means, so you've no grounds for protest. Sit down at that board over there and watch my mind every instant. The moment I think of what you're to do next, do it. Understand?"

"No, but—"

"You understand well enough. All right, let's go."

Rapidly he began to step down the Nernst current going into the field generators, mentally directing Celia in the delicate job of holding the fusion sphere steady against the diminished drain. Within a minute he had the field down to just above the threshold level.

"All right, now I'm going to cut it entirely. There'll be a big backlash on your board. See that master meter right in front of you at the head of the board? The big knob marked 'Back EMF' is keyed directly to that. When I pull this switch, the meter will kick over to some figure above the red line. At the same instant, you roll the dial down to *exactly* the same number. If you back it down too far, the Nernst will die and we'll have no power at all. If you don't go down far enough, the Nernst will detonate. You've got to catch it on the nose. Understand?"

"I—think so."

"Good. Five seconds, four, three, two, one, *cut*."

Celia twisted the dial.

For an instant, nothing happened. Then—

"Captain! Miss Gospardi! Where did you spring up from?" It was Oestreicher. He was standing right at Arpe's elbow.

"Stars! Stars!" Stauffer was shouting simultaneously. "Hey! Look! We're *back!*"

There was a confused noise of many people shouting in the belly of the *Flyaway II*. But in Arpe's brain there was blessed silence; the telepathic uproar had vanished. His mind was his own again.

"Good for you, Celia," he said. It was a sort of prayer. "We were in time."

"How did you do it, sir?" Oestreicher was saying. "We couldn't figure it out. We were following your exploration of the electron from here, eavesdropping as it were, and suddenly the whole planet just vanished. So did the whole system. We were floating in another atom entirely. We thought we'd lost you for good."

Arpe grinned weakly. "Did you know that you'd left the ship

behind when you jumped?"

"But we hadn't! It went right along with us—"

"Yes, it did that too. It was exercising its privilege to be in two places at the same time. As a body with negative mass, it had some of the properties of a Dirac hole; as such, it had to be echoed somewhere else in the universe by an electron, like a sink and a source in calculus. Did you wind up in one of the shells of the second atom?"

"We did," Stauffer said. "We couldn't move out of it, either."

"That's why I killed the field," Arpe explained. "I couldn't know what you would do under the circumstances, but I *was* pretty sure that the ship would resume its normal mass when the field went down. A mass that size, of course, can't exist in the microcosm, so the ship had to snap back. And in the macrocosm it isn't possible for a body to be in two places at the same time. So here we are, gentlemen—re-united."

"But where is here?" Stauffer said.

Arpe sobered quickly. "Evidently we burst up out of the second atom," he said. "Which could be anyplace in the universe. Take a look, Mr. Stauffer; do you see any Sol-type stars out there?"

"Yes, one, quite nearby, sir. Just a minute. I've been so rattled, I haven't gotten around to tests." He busied himself for a while. Arpe could wait. After all, Celia Gospardi was holding his hand.

Stauffer let out a whoop and looked up from the spectroscope, his face shining.

"Sir," he said, like a boy immensely proud of his father, "sir, it's Alpha Centauri. We are roughly forty astronomical units away from it—a milk run, sir."

Oestreicher turned to Arpe and held out his hand. Arpe shook it enthusiastically.

"A great achievement, sir," the second officer said. "It'll be cut and dried into a routine after its calibrated. I'm glad I was along while it was still new."

"It's pretty circuitous," Stauffer said, but his own enthusiasm was obvious. "There are probably different field values that predispose to different size Dirac jumps. But those can be worked out."

Arpe had no doubt that they could, but at the moment he was not thinking about it. He, Dr. Gordon Arpe, sometime laboratory recluse, sometime ersatz spaceship-captain, was being kissed by a 3-V star.

"Thank you, Celia," he said. "And welcome home."

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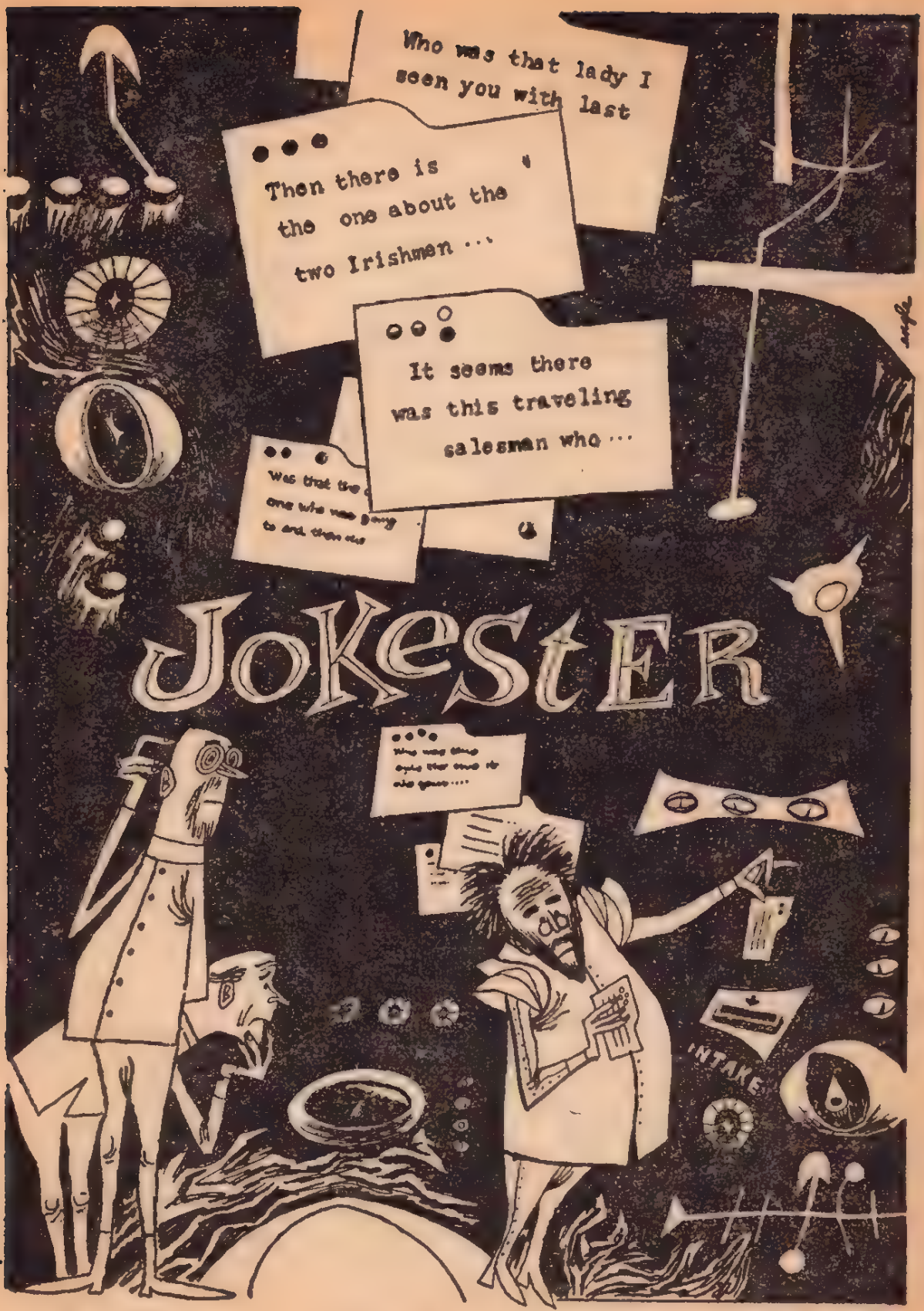

Who was that lady I seen you with last
Then there is the one about the two Irishmen ...
It seems there was this traveling salesman who ...
JOKESTER
INTAKE

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Jokester

by Isaac Asimov

Illustrated by ENGLE

NOEL MEYERHOF consulted the list he had prepared and chose which item was to be first. As usual, he relied mainly on intuition.

He was dwarfed by the machine he faced, though only the smallest portion of the latter was in view. That didn't matter. He spoke with the offhand confidence of one who thoroughly knew he was master.

"Johnson," he said, "came home unexpectedly from a business trip to find his wife in the arms of his best friend. He staggered back and said, 'Max! I'm married to the lady so I *have* to. But why you?' "

Meyerhof thought: Okay, let that trickle down into its guts and gurgle about a bit.

And a voice behind him said, "Hey."

Meyerhof erased the sound of that monosyllable and put the circuit he was using into neutral. He whirled and said, "I'm working. Don't you knock?"

He did not smile as he customarily did in greeting Timothy Whistler, a senior analyst with whom he dealt as often as with any. He frowned as he would have for an interruption by a stranger, wrinkling his thin face into a distortion that seemed to extend to his hair, rumpling it more than ever.

Whistler shrugged. He wore his white lab coat with his fists pressing down within its pockets and creasing it into tense vertical lines. "I knocked. You didn't answer. The operations signal wasn't on."

Meyerhof grunted. It wasn't on at that. He'd been thinking about this new project too intensively and he was forgetting little details.

And yet he could scarcely blame himself for that. This thing was important.

He didn't know *why* it was, of course. Grand Masters rarely did. That's what made them Grand Masters; the fact that they were beyond reason. How else could the human mind keep up with that ten-mile long lump of solidified reason that men called

What really happened to the traveling

salesman and the farmer's daughter—and why?

Here's the ultimate, horrifying answer.

Multivac, the most complex computer ever built?

Meyerhof said, "I *am* working. Is there something important on your mind?"

"Nothing that can't be postponed. There are a few holes in the answer on the hyperspatial —" Whistler did a double-take and his face took on a rueful look of uncertainty. *"Working?"*

"Yes. What about it?"

"But—" He looked about, staring into the crannies of the shallow room that faced the banks upon banks of relays that formed a small portion of Multivac. "There isn't anyone here at that."

"Who said there was, or should be?"

"You were telling one of your jokes, weren't you?"

"And?"

Whistler forced a s m i l e. "Don't tell me you were telling a joke to Multivac?"

Meyerhof stiffened. "Why not?"

"Were you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Meyerhof stared the other down. "I don't have to account to you. Or to anyone."

"Good Lord, of course not. I was curious, that's all. But then, if you're working, I'll leave." He looked about once more, frowning.

"Do so," said Meyerhof. His eyes followed the other out and then he activated the operations signal with a savage punch of his finger.

He strode the length of the room and back, getting himself in hand. Damn Whistler! Damn them all! Because he didn't bother to hold those technicians, analysts, and mechanics at the proper social distance, because he treated them as though they, too, were creative artists, they took all kinds of liberties.

He thought, grimly: *They can't even tell jokes decently!*

And instantly, that brought him back to the task in hand. He sat down again. Devil take them all.

He threw the proper Multivac

circuit back into operation and said, "The ship's steward stopped at the rail of the liner during a particularly rough ocean crossing and gazed compassionately at the man whose slumped position over the rail and whose intensity of gaze toward the depths betokened all too well the ravages of seasickness.

"Gently, the steward patted the man's shoulder. 'Cheer up, sir,' he murmured. 'I know it seems bad, but really, you know, nobody ever dies of seasickness.'

"The afflicted gentleman lifted his greenish, tortured face to his comforter and gasped in hoarse accents, 'Don't say that, man. For Heaven's sake, don't say that. It's only the hope of dying that's keeping me alive.' "

TIMOTHY WHISTLER, a bit preoccupied, nevertheless smiled and nodded as he passed the secretary's desk. She smiled back at him.

Here, he thought, was an archaic item in this computer-ridden world of the 21st Century, a human secretary. But then perhaps it was natural that such an institution should survive here in the very citadel of computerdom, in the gigantic world-corporation that handled Multivac. With Multivac filling the horizons, lesser computers for trivial tasks would have been in poor taste.

Whistler stepped into Abram Trask's office. That government official paused in his careful task of lighting a pipe; his dark eyes flicked in Whistler's direction and his beaked nose stood out sharply and prominently against the rectangle of window behind him.

"Ah, there, Whistler. Sit down. Sit down."

Whistler did so. "I think we've got a problem, Trask."

Trask half-smiled. "Not a technical one, I hope. I'm just an innocent politician." It was one of his favorite phrases.

"It involves Meyerhof."

Trask sat down instantly and looked acutely miserable. "Are you sure?"

"Reasonably sure."

Whistler understood the other's sudden unhappiness well. Trask was the government official in charge of the Division of Computers and Automation of the Department of the Interior. He was expected to deal with matters of policy involving the human satellites of Multivac, just as those technically trained satellites were expected to deal with Multivac itself.

But a Grand Master was more than just a satellite. More, even, than just a human.

Early in the history of Multivac, it had become apparent that there was one big bottleneck: the questioning procedure. Multivac

could answer the problems of humanity, *all* the problems, if —*if* it were asked meaningful questions. But as knowledge accumulated at an ever-faster rate, it became ever more difficult to locate those meaningful questions.

Reason alone wouldn't do. What was needed was a rare type of intuition, the same faculty of mind (only fantastically intensified) that made a Grand Master at chess. A mind was needed of the sort that could see through the quadrillions of chess patterns to find the one best move, and do it in a matter of minutes.

Trask moved restlessly. "What's Meyerhof been doing?"

"He's introduced a line of questioning that I find disturbing."

"Oh, come on, Whistler. Is that all? You can't stop a Grand Master from going through any line of questioning he chooses. Neither you nor I are equipped to judge the worth of his questions. You know that. I know you know that."

"I do. Of course. But I also know Meyerhof. Have you ever met him socially?"

"Good Lord, no. Does anyone meet any Grand Master socially?"

"Don't take that attitude, Trask. They're human and they're to be pitied. Have you ever thought what it must be like to be a Grand Master; to know there are only some twelve like you in the world; to know that only one or two come up per generation; that the world depends on you; that a thousand mathematicians, logicians, psychologists and physical scientists wait on you?"

Trask shrugged and muttered, "Good Lord, I'd feel king of the world."

"I don't think you would," said the senior analyst, impatiently. "They feel kings of nothing. They have no equals to talk to, no sensation of belonging. Listen, Meyerhof never misses a chance to get together with the boys. He isn't married, naturally; he doesn't drink; he has no natural social touch—yet he forces himself into company because he must. And do you know what he does when he gets together with us, and that's at least once a week?"

"I haven't the least idea," said the government man. "This is all new to me."

"He's a jokester."

"What?"

"He tells jokes. Good ones. He's terrific. He can take any story, however old and dull, and make it sound good. It's the way he tells it. He has a flair."

"I see. Well, good."

"Or bad. These jokes are important to him." Whistler put

both elbows on Trask's desk, bit at a thumbnail and stared into the air. "He's different, he knows he's different and these jokes are the one way he feels he can get the rest of us ordinary schmoes to accept him. We laugh, we howl, we clap him on the back and even forget he's a Grand Master. It's the only hold he has on the rest of us."

"This is all interesting. I didn't know you were such a psychologist. Still, where does this lead?"

"Just this. What do you suppose happens if Meyerhof runs out of jokes?"

"What?" The government man stared blankly.

"If he starts repeating himself? If his audience starts laughing less heartily, or stops laughing altogether? It's his only hold on our approval. Without it, he'll be alone and then what would happen to him? After all, Trask, he's one of the dozen men mankind can't do without. We can't let anything happen to him. I don't mean just physical things. We can't even let him get too unhappy. Who knows how that might affect his intuition?"

"Well, has he started repeating himself?"

"Not as far as I know, but I think *he* thinks he has."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I've heard him telling jokes to Multivac."

"Oh, no."

"Accidentally! I walked in on him and he threw me out. He was savage. He's usually good-natured enough, and I consider it a bad sign that he was so upset at the intrusion. But the fact remains that he was telling a joke to Multivac and I'm convinced it was one of a series."

"But why?"

Whistler shrugged and rubbed a hand fiercely across his chin. "I have a thought about that. I think he's trying to build up a store of jokes in Multivac's memory banks in order to get back new variations. You see what I mean? He's planning a mechanical jokester, so that he can have an infinite number of jokes at hand and never fear running out."

"Good Lord!"

"Objectively, there may be nothing wrong with that, but I consider it a bad sign when a Grand Master starts using Multivac for his personal problems. Any Grand Master has a certain inherent mental instability and he should be watched. Meyerhof may be approaching a borderline beyond which we lose a Grand Master."

Trask said, blankly, "What are you suggesting I do?"

"You can check me. I'm too close to him to judge well, maybe, and judging humans isn't my particular talent, anyway. You're

a politician; it's more your talent."

"Judging humans, perhaps. Not Grand Masters."

"They're human, too. Besides, who else is to do it?"

The fingers of Trask's hand struck his desk in rapid succession over and over like a slow and muted roll of drums.

"I suppose I'll have to," he said.

MEYERHOFF said to Multivac, "The ardent swain, picking a bouquet of wild-flowers for his loved one, was disconcerted to find himself, suddenly, in the same field with a large bull of unfriendly appearance which, gazing at him steadily, pawed the ground in a threatening manner. The young man, spying a farmer on the other side of a fairly distant fence, shouted, 'Hey, mister, is that bull safe?' The farmer surveyed the situation with critical eye, spat to one side and called back, 'He's safe as anything.' He spat again, and added, 'Can't say the same about you, though.' "

Meyerhof was about to pass on down the list when the summons came.

It wasn't really a summons. No one could summon a Grand Master. It was only a message that Division Head Trask would like very much to see Grand Master Meyerhof if Grand Master Meyerhof could spare him the time.

Meyerhof might, with impunity, have tossed the message to one side and continued with whatever he was doing. He was not subject to discipline.

On the other hand, were he to do that, they would continue to bother him—oh, very respectfully, but they would continue to bother him.

So he neutralized the pertinent circuits of Multivac and locked them into place. He put the freeze signal on his office so that no one would dare enter in his absence and started for Trask's office.

TRASK coughed and felt a bit intimidated by the sullen fierceness of the other's look. He said, "We have not had occasion to know one another, Grand Master, to my great regret."

"I have reported to you," said Meyerhof stiffly.

Trask wondered what lay behind those keen, wild eyes. It was difficult for him to imagine Meyerhof, with his thin face, his dark, straight hair, his intense air, ever unbending long enough to tell funny stories.

He said, "Reports are not social acquaintance. I—I have been given to understand you have a marvelous fund of anecdotes."

"I am a jokester, sir. That's the phrase people use."

"They haven't used the phrase to me, Grand Master. They have said—"

"The hell with them! I don't care what they've said. See here, Trask, do you want to hear a joke?" He leaned forward across the desk, his eyes narrowed.

"By all means. Certainly," said Trask, with an effort at heartiness.

"All right. Here's the joke: Mrs. Jones stared at the fortune-card that had emerged from the weighing machine in response to her husband's penny. She said, 'It says here, George, that you're suave, intelligent, far-seeing, industrious and attractive to women.' With that, she turned the card over and added. 'And they have your weight wrong, too.' "

Trask laughed. It was almost impossible not to. Although the punch-line was predictable, the surprising facility with which Meyerhoffff had produced just the tone of contemptuous disdain in the woman's voice, and the cleverness with which he had contorted the lines of his face to suit that tone, carried the politician helplessly into laughter.

Meyerhof said, sharply, "Why is that funny?"

Trask sobered. "I beg your pardon."

"I said, why is that funny? Why do you laugh?"

"Well," said Trask, trying to be reasonable. "The last line put everything that preceded in a new light. The unexpectedness—"

"The point is," said Meyerhof, "that I have pictured a husband being humiliated by his wife; a marriage that is such a failure that the wife is convinced that her husband lacks any virtue. Yet you laugh at that. If you were the husband, would you find it funny?"

He waited a moment in thought, then said, "Try this one, Trask: Abner was seated at his wife's sick-bed, weeping uncontrollably, when his wife, mustering the dregs of her strength, drew herself up to one elbow.

" 'Abner,' she whispered, 'Abner, I cannot go to my Maker without confessing my misdeeds.'

" 'Not now,' muttered the stricken husband. 'Not now, my dear. Lie back and rest.'

" 'I can't,' she cried. 'I must tell, or my soul will never know peace. I have been unfaithful to you, Abner. In this very house, not one month ago—'

" 'Hush, dear,' soothed Abner. 'I know all about it. Why else have I poisoned you?' "

Trask tried desperately to maintain equanimity but did not entirely succeed. He suppressed a chuckle imperfectly.

Meyerhof said, "So that's funny, too. Adultery. Murder. All funny."

"Well, now," said Trask, "books have been written analyzing humor."

"True enough," said Meyerhof, "and I've read a number of them. What's more, I've read most of them to Multivac. Still, the people who write the books are just guessing. Some of them say we laugh because we feel superior to the people in the joke. Some say it is because of a suddenly-realized incongruity, or a sudden relief from tension, or a sudden re-interpretation of events. Is there any simple reason? Different people laugh at different jokes. No joke is universal. Some people don't laugh at any joke. Yet what may be most important is that man is the only animal with a true sense of humor, the only animal that laughs."

Trask said, suddenly, "I understand. You're trying to analyze humor. That's why you're transmitting a series of jokes to Multivac."

"Who told you I was doing that? Never mind, it was Whistler. I remember, now. He surprised me at it. Well, what about it?"

"Nothing at all."

"You don't dispute my right to add anything I wish to Multivac's general fund of knowledge, or to ask any question I wish?"

"No, not at all," said Trask, hastily. "As a matter of fact, I have no doubt that this will open the way to new analyses of great interest to psychologists."

"Hmp. Maybe. Just the same there's something plaguing me that's more important than just the general analysis of humor. There's a specific question I have to ask. Two of them, really."

"Oh? What's that?" Trask wondered if the other would answer. There would be no way of compelling him if he chose not to.

But Meyerhof said, "The first question is this: Where do all these jokes come from?"

"What?"

"Who makes them up? Listen! About a month ago, I spent an evening swapping jokes. As usual, I told most of them and, as usual, the fools laughed. Maybe they really thought the jokes were funny and maybe they were just humoring me. In any case, one creature took the liberty of slapping me on the back and saying, 'Meyerhof, you know more jokes than any ten people I know.'

"I'm sure he was right, but it gave rise to a thought. I don't know how many hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of jokes I've told at one time or another in my life, yet the fact is I never made up one. Not one. I'd only repeated them. My only contribution

was to tell them. To begin with, I'd either heard them or read them. And the source of my hearing or reading didn't make up the jokes, either. I never met anyone who ever claimed to have constructed a joke. It's always 'I heard a good one the other day' and 'Heard any good ones lately?'

"*All the jokes are old!* That's why jokes exhibit such a social lag. They still deal with sea-sickness, for instance, when that's so easily prevented these days that almost no-one has ever experienced it. Or they'll deal with fortune - giving weighing - machines, like the joke I told you, when such machines are found only in antique shops. Well, then, who makes up the jokes?"

Trask said, "Is *that* what you're trying to find out?" It was on the tip of Trask's tongue to add: *Good Lord, who cares?* He forced that impulse down. A Grand Master's questions were always meaningful.

"Of course that's what I'm trying to find out. Think of it this way. It's not just that jokes happen to be old. They *must* be old to be enjoyed. It's essential that a joke not be original. There's one variety of humor that is, or can be, original and that's the pun. I've heard puns that were obviously made up on the spur of the moment. I have made some up myself. But no one laughs at such puns. You're not supposed to. You groan. The better the pun, the louder the groan. Original humor is not laugh-provoking. Why?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"All right. Let's find out. Having given Multivac all the information I thought advisable on the general topic of humor, I am now feeding it a number of selected jokes."

Trask found himself thoroughly intrigued. "Selected how?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Meyerhof. "They felt like the right ones. I'm Grand Master, you know."

"Oh, agreed. Agreed."

"From those jokes and the general philosophy of humor, my first request will be for Multivac to trace the origin of the jokes, if it can. Since Whistler is in on this and since he has seen fit to report it to you, have him down in Analysis day after tomorrow. I think he'll have a bit of work to do."

"Certainly. May I attend, too?"

Meyerhof shrugged. Trask's attendance was obviously a matter of indifference to him.

MEYERHOFF had selected the last in the series with particular care. What that care consisted of, he could not have said, but he had revolved a dozen possibilities in his mind and over and

over again had tested each for some indefinable quality of meaningfulness.

He said: "Ug, the caveman, observed his mate running to him in tears, her leopard-skin skirt in disorder. 'Ug,' she cried, distraught, 'do something quickly. A saber-tooth tiger has entered mother's cave. Do something!' Ug grunted, picked up his well-gnawed buffalo bone and said, 'Why do anything? Who the hell cares what happens to a sabre-tooth tiger?' "

It was then that Meyerhof asked his two questions and leaned back, closing his eyes. He was done.

"I SAW nothing absolutely wrong," said Trask to Whistler. "He told me what he was doing readily enough. It was odd, but legitimate."

"What he *claimed* he was doing," said Whistler.

"Even so. I can't stop a Grand Master on opinion alone. He seemed queer but, after all, Grand Masters are supposed to seem queer. I didn't think him insane."

"Using Multivac to find the source of jokes?" muttered the senior analyst in discontent. "That's not insane?"

"How can we tell?" asked Trask, irritably. "Science has advanced to the point where the only meaningful questions left are the ridiculous ones. The sensible ones have been thought of, asked and answered long ago."

"It's no use. I'm bothered."

"Maybe, but there's no choice now, Whistler. We'll see Meyerhof and you can do the necessary analysis of Multivac's response, if any. As for me, my only job is to handle the red tape. Good Lord, I don't even know what a senior analyst such as yourself is supposed to do, except analyze —and that doesn't help me any."

Whistler said, "It's simple enough. A Grand Master like Meyerhof asks questions and Multivac automatically formulates it into quantities and operations. The necessary machinery for converting words to symbols is what makes up most of the bulk of Multivac. Multivac then gives the answer in quantities and operations, but it doesn't translate that back into words except in the most simple and routine cases. If it were designed to solve the general re-translation problem, its bulk would have to be quadrupled at least."

"I see. Then it's your job to translate these symbols into words?"

"My job and that of other analysts. We use smaller, specially designed computers whenever necessary." Whistler s m i l e d grimly. "Like the Delphic priestess of ancient Greece, Multivac gives oracular and obscure an-

swers. Only we have translators, you see."

They had arrived. Meyerhof was waiting.

Whistler said, briskly, "What circuits did you use, Grand Master?"

Meyerhof told him and Whistler went to work.

TRASK tried to follow what was happening, but none of it made sense. The government official watched a spool unreel with a pattern of dots in endless incomprehensibility. Grand Master Meyerhof stood indifferently to one side while Whistler surveyed the pattern as it emerged. The analyst had put on headphones and a mouthpiece and at intervals murmured a series of instructions which, at some far-off place, guided assistants through electronic contortions in other computers.

Occasionally, Whistler listened, then punched combinations on a complex keyboard marked with symbols that looked vaguely mathematical but weren't.

A good deal more than an hour elapsed.

The frown on Whistler's face grew deeper. Once, he looked up at the two others and began, "This is unbel—" and turned back to his work.

Finally, he said, hoarsely, "I can give you an unofficial answer." His eyes were red-rimmed. They looked raw, somehow. "The official answer awaits complete analysis. Do you want it unofficial?"

"Go ahead," said Meyerhof.

Trask nodded.

Whistler darted a hangdog glance at the Grand Master. "Ask a foolish question . . ." he said. Then, gruffly, "Multivac says extra-terrestrial origin."

"What are you saying?" demanded Trask.

"Don't you hear me? The jokes we laugh at were not made up by any man. Multivac has analyzed all data given it and the one answer that best fits that data is that some extra-terrestrial intelligence has composed the jokes, all of them, and placed them in selected human minds at selected times and places in such a way that no man is conscious of having made one up. All subsequent jokes are minor variations and adaptations of these grand originals."

Meyerhof broke in, face flushed with the kind of triumph only a Grand Master who once again has asked the right question can know. "All comedy writers," he said, "work by twisting old jokes to new purposes. That's well-known. The answer fits."

"But why?" asked Trask. "Why make up the jokes?"

"Multivac says," said Whistler, "that the only purpose that fits all the data is that the jokes

are intended to study human psychology. We study rat psychology by making the rats solve mazes. The rats don't know why and wouldn't even if they were aware of what was going on, which they're not. These outer intelligences study man's psychology by noting individual reactions to carefully selected anecdotes. Each man reacts differently. Presumably, these outer intelligences are to us as we are to rats." He shuddered.

Trask, eyes staring, said, "The Grand Master said man was the only animal with a sense of humor. It would seem then that the sense of humor is foisted upon us from without."

Meyerhof added excitedly, "And for possible humor created from within, we have no laughter. Puns, I mean."

Whistler said, "Presumably, the extra-terrestrials cancel out reactions to spontaneous jokes to avoid confusion."

Trask said, in sudden agony of spirit, "Come on, now. Good Lord, do either of you believe this?"

The senior analyst looked at him coldly. "Multivac says so. It's all that can be said so far. It has pointed out the real jokesters of the universe and if we want to know more, the matter will have to be followed up." He added in a whisper, "If anyone dares to follow it up."

Grand Master Meyerhof said suddenly, "I asked two questions, you know. So far only the first has been answered. I think Multivac has enough data to answer the second."

Whistler shrugged. He seemed a half-broken man. "When a Grand Master thinks there is enough data," he said, "I'll make book on it. What is your second question?"

"I asked this: What will be the effect on the human race to discover the answer to my first question?"

"Why did you ask that?" demanded Trask.

"Just a feeling that it had to be asked," said Meyerhof.

Trask said, "Insane. It's all insane," and turned away. Even he felt how strangely he and Whistler had changed sides. Whistler, who had originally cried insanity, now believed implicitly. And Trask could not bring himself to . . .

Trask closed his eyes. He might cry insanity all he wished but no man in fifty years had doubted the combination of a Grand Master and Multivac and found his doubts verified.

Whistler worked silently, teeth clenched. He put Multivac and its subsidiary machines through their paces again. Another hour passed and he laughed harshly. "This is a

Continued on page 130

The

by EDWARD WELLEN

The DSX had no clues

—and they had to find

not only whodunit,

but also what, where

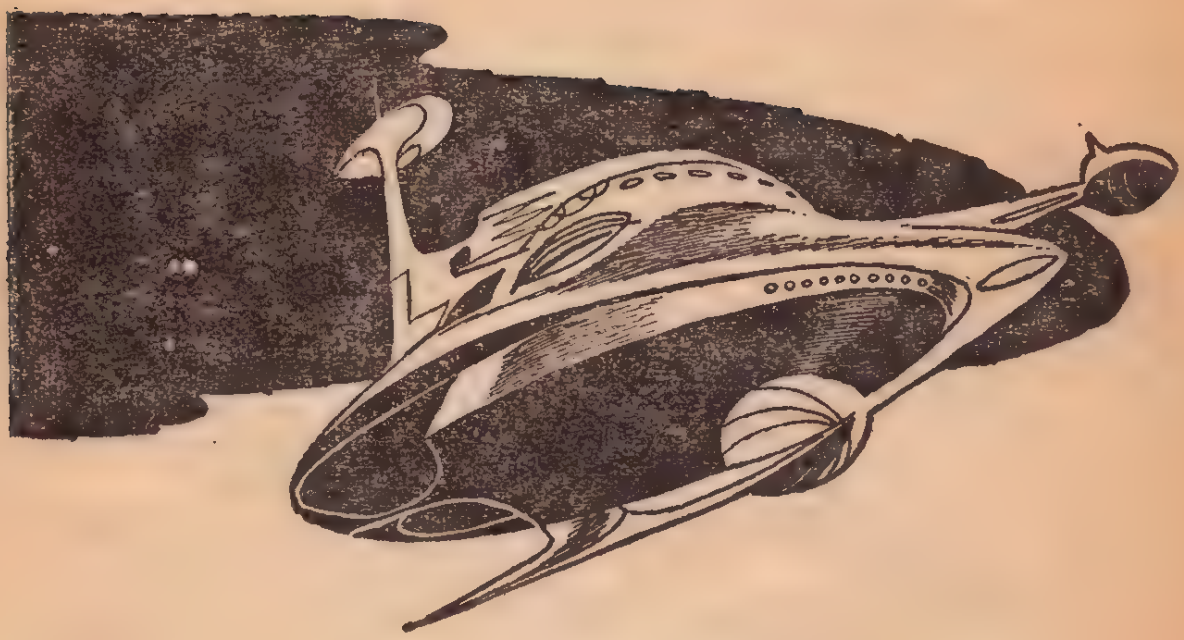
and how did who do!

PROLOGUE

FLAMING and hissing, the jets tattooed the ground. In a chained reaction the spaceship came quiveringly alive but failed to rise.

In the control room, Van Gutyf saw that the captain's hand was avoiding the take-off key. He lifted an eyebrow but said nothing.

Illustrated by EMSH



Superstition-Seeders

Captain Sy Burnett caught the lifting, a movement so slight he must have been looking for it. He smiled. Then he wiped the smile off and tuned in the spaceport channel.

Eyes splatted on the screen and stared at them inquiringly.

"Emergency!" Captain Burnett said, looking anxious. "Power failure. Please send take-off assistance."

The eyes blinked acknowledgment.

And shortly six squat figures emerged from the maintenance shop and waddled in single file across the tarmac. Van saw as they neared that the combined lettering in lingua galactica on their uniforms spelled out MUANIK.

Captain Burnett frowned and began thumbing through his

glossary, muttering, "Now what the blazes is *muanik?*"

Van had gone through the captain's glossary once, at the beginning of the trip. For him, once was enough. A word leaped to his lips. " 'Milkmaid.' "

" *'Milkmaid'!?* Now why the—"

"Take it easy, Captain," Van said, smiling. "I think another letter will be along in a moment."

And in a moment another K emerged from the maintenance shop, came puffing up, and squeezed between U and A.

"Ah!" Captain Burnett said. "That's more like it. 'Mechanic.' "

M gave a sign and they halted. Together they opened their toolboxes and brought out what seemed to be baseball bats. M set fire to his and put his torch to the other torches. M gave another sign and they formed a wide circle around the spaceship. Together they jabbed the fiery tips at the ground, let out their breath in one long hissing, and leaped into the air.

Captain Burnett motioned Van down and himself settled back in his seat. Hiding the move from the eyes on the screen he flicked the take-off key. The craft rose on a gaseous column. The eyes vanished.

When his plumbing unkinked and the green feeling passed, Van said quietly, "All right, Captain. I'm getting the idea. That was mimetic magic back there. On Whuud it was contagious magic. On Nyllu it was—"

"Yes, yes," Captain Burnett said impatiently, slicing the edge of his hand down. He sighed gloomily. "So now you see what Man is up against. I ask you," he said plaintively, "what if we *really* had been in a spot back there? I'll tell you. Those jumping jacks would up and down until the snap went out of their tendons—and we'd still be grounded. That—and worse—has happened, because superstition has started up wherever Man touches." And he glared at Van.

"Hum." Van stared puzzledly back. "But I've seen nothing about it in the news. And there's certainly nothing about it in the guidebooks."

"Of course not," the captain said angrily. "No use panicking the home planets."

"Hum." Van Gutyf squinted thoughtfully. "What started it?"

"You mean *who.*" The captain looked grim. "Some beings are deliberately seeding superstitions."

Van leaned toward him. " 'Some'? Can't you say right out?"

EDWARD WELLEN *is a comparative newcomer to science fiction, yet we don't think we're going out on a limb by calling "The Superstition-Seeders" the novel of the year. For the treasure-house of new ideas Wellen has packed into this one story would have lasted the average writer for years, and it sparkles with action, humor, and an excitingly unique writing style. It's a five-star sensation you'll want to re-read over and over again!*

"No," the captain said sharply. Then in a gentler tone, "Not that I wouldn't like to, but we simply don't know." He grimaced. "It's maddening. They always leave just before we come or come just after we leave. That's not chance. That's timing. They don't want us to know who they are."

VAN WAITED quietly while the captain saw to the taping of their course, then he said wonderingly, "What's in it for the seeders?"

"Why are they doing it?" The captain laughed bitterly. "Again, we simply don't know." A pause and then, "But we can guess. They've seen Man's ambitious drive. Apparently they're putting themselves out to stymie us. They may live in dread of our monopolizing the prospecting and trading and colonizing in their sector. They may dream of invading ours. Whatever motivates them, they're undermining whole social structures with floodwaters of superstition—all over space transportation and communication are collapsing."

"Hum." Van's body tensed. He braced his mind.

"Now you know how things stand," the captain said briskly, "will you track down the seeders?"

Van waited until he felt he had his vocal cords in hand, like reins, then said, "But why *me?*"

Captain Burnett scowled. "If you can't answer that yourself," he said harshly, "then maybe you're not the man we want, after all." He turned away pointedly and ran his eye needlessly over the controls.

Van smiled sadly. "I was hoping to escape this moment. I've seen it coming. Ever since winning the four-dimensional jigsaw puzzle contest I've known there was more at stake than this free trip around the galaxy."

The captain smiled sadistically. "Just when did you first realize it?"

Van said quietly, "You know well enough—when I found myself alone in this tub with you."

The captain laughed. "And you anticipating a luxury liner

with lovely stewardesses?" He laughed again. "Your face sure kerplunked!"

Van flushed slightly, though smiling ruefully at himself.

The captain sobered. He said incisively, "Young man, there *aren't* any more luxury liners with lovely stewardesses. There are only a few thousand tubs like this. That's what the seeders have done to our merchant fleet already." He fell silent a moment, brooding, then snapped out of it. "All right, you tell me. Why *you?*"

Van made a deprecating gesture. "I'm not falsely modest. I succeeded in mentally piecing together that devilish puzzle, with all those eyes watching and with the time ticking away. Nominally, Doozy-Wheat sponsored the quiz program, but the Galactic Council must've been behind it—hunting someone having that twist of mind and the ability to use it under pressure. That's why me."

"Right." The captain's voice was toneless. "And I have the authority to ask you to set up and head a bureau to find the seeders."

Van pursed his lips. "Executive work? That kind of thing isn't my cup of tea."

The captain examined his nails. "Oh, I wouldn't blame you for not wanting to take it on. There'd be powerful forces opposing you. For one, there'd be a pressure group of all those who can't see slow death for the fast buck—those who'd welcome superstition because they'd capitalize on it."

"Hum. You mean like that salesman we saw on Kviir—where they believe a ghost has to count all the leaves on a tree growing in front of a home before it can pass and enter—the one selling a sap serum to make trees non-deciduous and ghost-proof homes through the winter?"

"Yes. And you'd be up against the most powerful force of all—Time. According to our trend analysts, Man will have to pull back to the home planets for good—to keep from drowning in superstition—if we don't stop the seeding by 2828."

"That wouldn't be giving the bureau much leeway."

"No, it wouldn't," the captain said levelly. "Well?"

"I'll do my best," Van said quietly.

"Put it there, son," the captain said with feeling. "You're now Chief of the D.S.X."

Through an aura of exaltation Van heard himself saying, "D.S.X.? What do the letters stand for?"

The captain smiled. "The whole thing is so hush-hush you'll probably never learn that."

They put in at Xivve to refuel. Then, with obliging natives hollering threateningly at the sky to frighten it into giving way, they took off for Terra.

That was at the beginning of the year 2811.

CHAPTER I

In the latter half of 2811, Tyl Waqa, nominally a trader from Alphecca IV, whizzed into Syrma II's atmosphere. He found not enough trading to make his stay worth while. The Syrmans were too busy vying with each other for possession of *tovhs*. Still, Tyl didn't whiz right out. It seemed he didn't care as much about trading as about the Syrmans and their ways.

Tyl himself had a way of putting the Syrmans at their ease. He became something of a fixture, establishing rapport through the medium of easy-going good nature, and one of his new friends filled him in on the *tovh* craze, since he seemed to want to dowse the why of it.

Tovhs were a strange sort of gem. There were only so many of them. There was no mining of them on Syrma II or on any planet within the Galactic Council's knowing. A spaceship had landed and the gems had appeared.

Syrma II's memory of the visitors was vague. It included no knowledge of where they came from and next to nothing about their traits. The one thing that stood out was the visitors' parting gesture.

On corkscrewing away from Syrma II, they scattered over the planet thousands upon thousands of the gems, each set in a leaden circlet.

And almost at once a thick stand of superstition sprouted around the theme that anyone wearing a circlet would become lightheaded and in a tingling of ecstasy would set out on deeds of daring he feared to dream of before.

But the craze really took hold as a result of what happened to Afzevi, the most famous mummer of Syrma II.

By sheer force of personality, Afzevi had reached the summit of his profession. He made the dramaturgid Syrman stage a setting for his dazzling. This wasn't easy. Syrman players interrupt their acting at every moment to utter a disclaimer of identity with the part—"This be not I." For should death take an actor while he played a part he would lose his own identity and be that part in the land of spirits. But in spite of this stepping in and out of character, this disconcerting oscillating between the real and the make-believe, Afzevi made a

lasting impression on audience and critics alike.

He attained the height of his ambition. He was to leave his imprint in the pavement fronting the Actors' Academy.

While waiting for the plastic to reach the proper consistency, Afzevi in high spirits cavorted about, diverting the idolizing gathering. He felt full of bounce and, without much urging from the photographers and to the warming accompaniment of feminine shrieking, he scrambled up, up, up, until he was posturing atop a towering plastic likeness of himself.

He balanced there, carelessly.

Encircling his neck was a collar holding a *tovh* gem. Afzevi had received it from an unknown admirer who had evidently fallen for his trait profile. With it came a note saying it was something new—a charm, proof against falling from high places.

Tovhs had only lately come to light on Syrma II, but already were lodestones for lore. What he had heard tell of their potency must have impressed Afzevi. He grew more and more unheeding.

Now he twisted his face into what the roaring throng at once recognized as a mimicking of his arch-rival, Dichyl. And his spellbound audience leaped from laugh to gasp as it followed his capering.

He wasn't himself—or he was very much himself. Ordinarily he shrouded the sparkling talisman so the likes of Dichyl would not share the virtue of it. Now he allowed himself to unveil it.

The throng cheered madly.

And right then the *tovh*'s reflecting of sunglare blinded him. He missed his footing and hurtled down, down, down. And before you could say "This be not I," his twisted face impressed itself in the firming plastic.

But, sure enough, the *tovh* at his neck remained unbroken. Truly, it was proof against falling.

Tyl nodded gravely.

After a respectful silence, Tyl's friend said, "There were those who suspected Dichyl of being the unknown admirer." But he went on to say that if such was the case Dichyl had won a hollow triumph; as long as he lived he was never able to top Afzevi and he went chapfallen to meet his other self in the land of spirits.

Tyl had listened with such flattering attention that when he spoke of wanting to own a *tovh* his friend volunteered to help him, though it was no light undertaking. There was a continuing demand for the stones—all

Syrma II sought to find in the *tovh* the means of emulating Afzevi, of attaining his lightness of spirit and the selfless glory of his ending—and they were hard to get even though they changed owners rather rapidly.

Tyl's friend tipped him off to a private sale. It took some spirited bidding, but Tyl at last had his *tovh*.

It was a perfect gem, not a scratch on it. But finding the weight and the matte hue of the lead setting not to his liking, he had a jeweler pry the stone loose and attach it to his gleaming phosphorsilicon charm bracelet.

As soon as he began wearing the *tovh* a strange thing happened. His very character seemed to change. He felt curiously buoyant, but with an underlying iceberg bulk of unease.

He tried to tell himself he was imagining things, and it worked at first. Then he grew aware of an eerie compulsive action he couldn't pass off as something he was imagining.

He found himself saluting when there was no one and nothing to salute. His hand would slowly rise to his temple. At the touch he would become angrily conscious of the hand and would snap it down smartly. It gave him a creepy feeling.

It was proving embarrassing too. His Syrman friends kept badgering him about the chilling formality they caught him practicing. They hinted that his mask of easygoing good nature was slipping, baring some ulterior motive.

It was the *tovh*'s doing, though Tyl shrank from admitting it. He used to smile at superstition. Now he had to believe there might be something in it or believe he was unbalancing.

He wondered if his *tovh* was the one that had led to Afzevi's plummeting and if it would ecstatize him, too, to a fall. At least, he told himself wryly, if he fell he would make his mark, though he was far from having the heavy Syrman build. He caught himself saluting as if honoring Afzevi's memory.

All at once he shivered. His spine was an icicle.

HE SALUTED. "Tyl Waqa, DSX Agent 504, reporting, sir."

Chief Van Gutyf returned the salute. The specter of the seeders had left shadows under the penetrating eyes that now regarded Tyl. He said quietly, "Welcome back, Tyl."

Tyl saluted. "Thank you, sir."

The Chief returned the salute. He waited gravely.

Tyl said, somewhat haltingly, "Sorry I'm late, sir. I made amazingly good time from Syrma II to Terra, but that cross-town traffic . . ."

"That's all right, Tyl," the Chief said quietly. "I understand."

Tyl saluted. "Thank you, sir."

The Chief returned the salute. He waited gravely.

Tyl said, "Sir, I understand you wish me to amplify my report." He saluted.

The Chief automatically started to salute back. The Chief's face suddenly purpled. With a loud fist the Chief struck his desk, and an object resting on the desk—a leaden circlet with a gouge in its outer rim—rumbled. "Take the damn thing off!" he shouted.

"Sorry, sir." Flustered, Tyl fumbled with the catch of his charm bracelet. The bracelet slipped out of his over-anxious hands.

It began to fall, then thought better of it. For a moment it wavered like the bubble of a spirit level in a palsy-shaking hand, then lifted slowly.

It came to rest against the ceiling with a brassy ring. Tyl leaped up and grabbed it.

He tried to look casual. "That's what I spoke of in my report, sir."

"Hum." The Chief brooded for a moment. "Well, we'll let the labsters worry about how it does what it does. What did you find out about the visitors who scattered the *tovhs?*"

Tyl shook his head regretfully. "Not much, sir. Upright, mammal with a trace of reptile. That's all the Syrmans know about them. And the Syrmans never got a close look at the spaceship. It hovered fairly high—a wolf in woolpack, you might say." He smiled tentatively.

"Hum."

Tyl withdrew the smile. He said, "Each visitor wore a belt." He pointed to the leaden circlet on the Chief's desk. "With the *tovh* in it, of course. To reach the ground the visitor dove out of the airlock. To return to the ship the visitor swam up."

"Hum. That all?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hum." The Chief prodded the circlet with a forefinger.

Tyl cleared his throat and the Chief glanced up. "Might I venture a bit of guessing, sir?"

"Hum."

"Thank you, sir. Well, the run of the visitors must be about as much lighter than I am, as I am than a Syrman. The *tovh* must counterbalance the weight of the belt and the one wearing it. And so—"

"Hum. Then why didn't the belts they scattered take off,

when there was nothing to counterbalance, instead of falling to the ground?"

"That bothered me, too, sir."

"Hum."

"Then I reasoned it out—more lead or smaller *tovh.*"

"Hum. Reason out why they scattered the things?"

"That's what I was coming to, sir."

"Hum."

"Sir, I believe these beings are the ones seeding superstition. They knew the Syrmans would try to emulate their use of the belts. They knew the Syrmans' memory of the stone's properties would decay to superstition. And they knew that as the lead wore away with use and the belt got lighter and lighter the eerie sensation would grow more intense and reinforce the superstition."

"Hum. How'd they know the Syrmans wouldn't respond by experimenting, analyzing?"

"The Syrman mind doesn't work that way, sir. It jumps to conclusions. It can't take shorter hops and skips."

"Hum." The Chief glanced up quizzically. "You don't call it experimenting when Syrmans wear the belts around their necks?"

Tyl smiled. "Sir, have you ever seen a Syrman? That's as far as they can squeeze into it."

"Hum."

"Experimenting, sir? Why, no Syrman ever dreamed of removing the *tovh* from its setting. The jeweler thought I was crazy."

"Hum. Hold on. Why didn't the *tovh* float away when he pried it out?"

"Sir, I think *tovh* is anti-grav only when it touches solid elements."

"Hum. Then why didn't your bracelet take off as soon as he set the *tovh* in it, the way it took off just now?"

"I was wearing it, sir, while he attached the *tovh.* I wear it always. It's a kind of a—a habit."

"Hum."

"It wasn't until I had the amusing thought that the *tovh* might really be bringing some sort of influence to bear . . ." He broke off with a slight shudder. It relieved him to see the Chief glance up with a sympathetic look. He went on. "It was then I first removed the bracelet and learned what was making me salute."

"Hum."

"Well," Tyl said, after an awkward hiatus, "we have one thing to go on, sir."

"Hum?"

"The lightness of the visitors."

"Hum."

"Well, don't you see, sir? That should give us a lead to

the kind of planet they come from."

The Chief said, very calmly, "All we have to do is find the right star."

"Yes, sir."

The Chief struck his desk; the leaden circlet rumbled. "Damn it, man, we don't even know their name! Finding that out is the minimum goal I've set the DSX for the coming year. . . . All right, Tyl, you can leave."

"Yes, sir." Tyl turned and made for the door.

The Chief waited for Tyl to reach it, then barked, "Tyl!" Tyl spun around in alarm. The Chief made thunderclouds of his brows. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Tyl gazed around the room. "Why, I don't think so, sir," he said worriedly.

"We can't let discipline get lax," the Chief said, smiling. "You forgot to salute before leaving."

CHAPTER II

In 2812, Izuivo' Idvuv, otherwise DSX Agent 1499, sped to Tarazed VI. He burned with zeal to get at his job—investigating why a being from Kitalpha I was languishing in jail there. He knew only that the charge arose out of conflicting superstitions.

It agitated him to learn he might just as well have taken his time getting there. The Tarazedd were celebrating one of their two Overlap Weeks. Affairs of state had to wait—a shocking state of affairs.

Overlap Weeks are the great holidays of the Tarazedd. The males hibernate, the females estivate. But, luckily for the running on of the race, there's one common waking period at the ending of estivating and the beginning of hibernating, and there's another at the ending of hibernating and the beginning of estivating. Happy, happy Overlap Weeks.

But even when this particular Overlap Week came to an end, Izuivo' seemed to make no headway. The halls of the governing body re-opened, but the male clerks he showed his credentials to smilingly but stubbornly refused to understand lingua galactica.

He set out to learn their language. By the time he mastered it the next Overlap Week had come and gone. The halls of the governing body re-opened, but the female clerks he showed his credentials to refused to understand him. They were, however, he had to admit, very smiling and regretful.

Grimly, he set out to learn the *females'* language. It wasn't in him to simply doze away the

days until the male administration returned. And though the waiting was taking its toll of his nerves it paid off. His twitching with impatience turned to trembling with excitement.

Studying the two tongues, he found they had only one word in common. And delving into earlier editions of Tarazedd dictionaries he further found this one word had sprung into use at the same time as the upwelling of superstition.

The word was *crevbnod*. To the females it meant "dallying with a handsome male." To the males it meant "dallying with a beautiful female."

Izuivo' considered the shortness of the Overlap periods. *Crevbnod*, connoting the frittering away of productive time in mere teasing play, seemed a curious concept for Tarazed VI. What's more, the dictionaries were strangely bashful about the etymology of *crevbnod*.

He felt he was on the spoor of something.

Another Overlap Week had passed, and again the halls of the governing body re-opened. At Izuivo' 's first uttering in their tongue the male clerks were quick to understand him. And they were quite willing to lend their aid when he told them he was looking into the detaining of the Kitalphan. They expedited him from office to office.

The going seemed almost too frictionless. But Izuivo' was too glad to be moving to let that give him pause.

And in nearly no time he was facing Customs Commissioner Ozdvovopsh. Ozdvovopsh deplored the misunderstanding. Tarazed VI and Kitalpha I were a natural trading set-up. Each had what the other wanted.

But Kitalphans were shunning this planet, now that the Tarazedd had begun enforcing the collecting of tolls. Not that Kitalphans were pikers. The one now languishing had proved most ungrudging—in all save the paying of tolls. Tolls suddenly seemed to cause Kitalphans to shiver with superstitious dread. Ozdvovopsh smiled superciliously.

Izuivo' asked why the Tarazedd wouldn't waive the tolls.

Ozdvovopsh shuddered. That wasn't a thing to even dream of. Not that Tarazedd were grasping. As Izuivo' must have seen for himself, they were most understanding and least demanding—in all save the collecting of tolls.

They knew allowing visitors to come and go without paying a toll would affront Fortune. Finding Its darlings spurning Its offerings, Fortune, nursing wounded feelings, would from

then on hold back further blessings. Ozdvovopsh laughed nervously. Why, not so many cycles ago his forebears had been too forbearing. They had a chance once to get their fill of—something. It so overwhelmed them they imagined it would last forever and they lightly *crev*— What he meant was— Well, it wasn't the kind of thing one spoke of to outsiders.

He was glad to shunt the subject and readily agreed to let Izuivo' go through the customs records.

Izuivo' waded back to the time *crevbnod* became a word. He found what he was looking for. Only one spaceship had landed around that time and stayed a full cycle. "Landed" bothered him until he found its opposite number in the writing on the female half of the page meant "hovered."

Trading had gone on between ship and planet for the full of the cycle. But anyone narrowing his eyes could see it for a long thin trickle that would have made one good spurt. The ship's complement had lots of time for giving new meaning to the name they went by—*Crevbnod*.

But anything that might have hinted at where the ship came from and where it was going was missing.

That was as far as he could go in that direction.

He got leave to see the Kitalphan.

SHE called herself Benx. He couldn't take his eyes off her. She turned on him a disarming look that armed him at once. Though he'd made up his mind not to take sides, he saw at once he was soft on her.

And that made him hard on her. He was almost rude in his questioning. The quiet dignity of her listening and answering shamed him, but he didn't let up. If anything, his attitude hardened.

Benx told him of having heard that once the then Leading Light of her folk welcomed a strange spaceship. The visitors —no, she didn't know their name, it had become tabu—invited the Leading Light to come aboard.

There they would give him a custom-built model of the wonderful belts they wore, absolutely free. They asked him his weight and with some pride he called it up to them.

On time, two visitors touched down to swim him up to the hovering ship. For a minute it seemed the escorting pair would be unable to separate him from the ground. He was plump to begin with and at the moment he was lumpy with coin he

meant to press on the visitors anyway, free offer notwithstanding.

But with much straining they tugged him aloft. The captain ceremoniously belted him. The Leading Light beamed. And right away he wanted to make some trial dives. The captain ushered him back to the airlock. The Leading Light put out.

"And so it is the way with us that we never carry sums to pay for any mode of transport. For any other purpose, yes."

Weeks after Izuivo' had drawn all he could from Benx he found reasons to go on seeing her. The sky began flaking again. Overlap Week passed. It took longer to break away from one female clerk and move on to the next in line, but he kept running the clinging gauntlet to get passes to prison. Yet when he reached Benx he would find himself hiding his feelings by rawhiding hers and he would feel at one and the same time sinister and gauche.

But at last he yielded himself to the promptings of his heart.

By now the Chief must know Izuivo' was adding nothing new to the reports he'd already sent in. Soon he'd be rushing away on another job. He'd never see Benx again. She'd languish here the rest of her life. She'd never give in to the Tarazedd and they too were uncompromising.

During the coming Overlap Week it'd be a cinch to help her escape. Not only that, but they could steal into the Customs offices and strip everything dealing with Benx from the files, leaving behind not only no prisoner but no case.

He slicked up and got a pass. He had to slick up again by the time he reached Benx. Couldn't those females be more business-like? Still, it was flattering they thought of him *crevbnod*-wise. It emboldened him to broach his plan to Benx.

She listened in silence and then thanked him. But she gently noed. It was too thrilling here. She wanted to stay and see how it would all turn out.

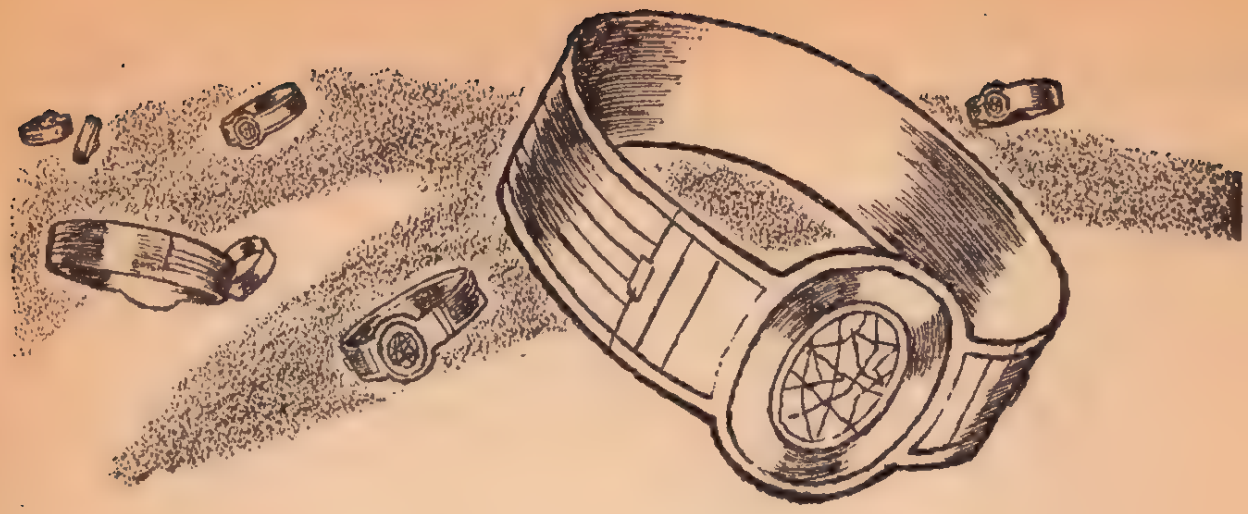
Mumbling to himself, he left.

Returning to his hotel through drifts of zebra-striped snow, he cooled down; it was up to him to make it come out right.

Adroitly he played up to Customs Commissioner Casuovopsh. When he sensed she was ready he drew up an understanding. She signed, agreeing to let Fortune decide the case. Izuivo' relaxed, but not for long.

Casuovopsh told him this came under the heading of policy-making. He'd have to get her male counterpart, Ozdvovopsh, to countersign.

During Overlap Week Izuivo' worked on Benx. The guards



were off, celebrating, and he had a free hand.

"But it won't mean you're paying a toll. You're betting. That's always exciting, waiting to see how your bet turns out."

"Yes! Yes!" Her grape-bloomed eyes were shining.

Ozdvovopsh was hardest to sell of all.

"I'll countersign," he said after long hesitating, after weeks of putting off and putting off making up his mind. Izuivo' checked his joy as Ozdvovopsh added, "*If* you guarantee Fortune favors us."

He was edgy, awaiting Overlap, and Izuivo' didn't utter what sprang to his lips. Izuivo' considered, then nodded.

But when the time came—after Overlap—he was wondering if he was doing right. Then Benx appeared and he left off wondering.

He asked her to hand him a 42.3-*petaap* note, the amount of the levy, and she did so expectantly. He fumbled dexterously behind his back, then thrust out both fists.

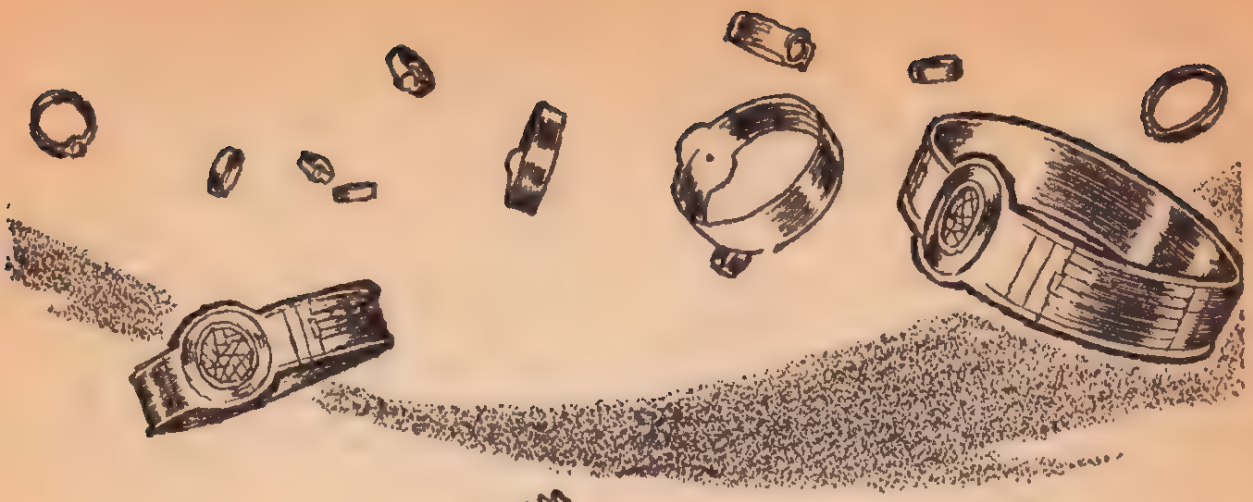
At first he thought Casuovopsh was balking at the last minute, even though she knew of the guarantee. But she was only taking her time. After deliberating with her staff, and even consulting the guards who'd led Benx to her office, she chose the left.

Right!

He was proud of Benx. Her face never flickered. She'd lost, but she'd won the right to go free at once. And he asked her to go with him.

She turned him down kindly, the bloom gone from her eyes.

He was too numb to notice or care that Casuovopsh had



slipped him a 6.25-*petaap* note. But after a bit he saw he had a good thing, one that in time might make him forget Benx. He'd become an entrepreneur in his own right.

So there'd be no conflict of interests, he broke all links with the DSX and cast his lot among the Tarazedd.

Though Benx hadn't yet left, she was making arrangements to go. But when Fortune continued against all the rules of chance to favor the Tarazedd, no matter which hand they chose, and Izuivo', who acted as Betting Commissioner for the rapidly reviving Tarazed VI-Kitalpha I trade, continued to get his cut, Benx came to regard him as the Tarazedd did, with superstitious awe. And she stayed on and married him.

He knew she married him mainly to pluck the secret of his

telekinetic power. And fearing to lose her once she had it he resolved firmly never to let her winkle it out.

By the time she did—learning he palmed a note of his own so either hand was right—she was too fond of him to leave.

THE CHIEF taped his thinking-aloud and played it back, over and over, superimposing the new thinking-aloud it evoked. The result was a conversation with himself.

"Hum. Now we're a shade nearer a make. *Crevbnod.*"

"We know they're beings of—"

"Or able to take the form of—"

"At least two sexes."

"And their m. o. is shaping up. Boils down to doing something to excite wonder."

"Hum. Seems all beings are superstition-prone. It only takes a little seeding to trigger the predisposing dark forces in the shifting cloud-shapes of living matter."

"Hum. 'The dark forces in the shifting cloud-shapes of living matter.' "

"Hum. Something we have to watch out for. Take this chap Izuivo'. Doing a good job, of a sort, getting trading going again, I mean, but he's made us tread on a few toes. The Purists are sore at us for generating new superstitions while investigating old. And the Galactic Culture people—"

"Hum. Galactic Culture. Always makes me think of yogurt or acidophilus."

"—want us to leave it to them to set things right, which means to let them set things wrong their own way."

"Hum. Another thing. Why doesn't the scatter diagram show a perfect functional relationship?"

"Hum. Yes, what about those planets where no *Crevbnod* has ever been, yet where superstition has sprung up?"

"Hum. Better spot-check those ornery dots."

"Hum," he chorused.

CHAPTER III

IN 2814, DSX Agent 817 touched Cernpure III. One whiff of the cloying atmosphere and he determined to get this over with fast. One squint at the dark woods encircling the rundown spaceport hostel and he determined to get this over with faster. One earful of a weird moaning tendriling the dusk and he was ready to turn back right now.

He checked in and demanded of the manager where he might find the Terran José Jmenuje.

The manager took five paces,

which brought him around the desk and to the doorway. He paused there a long, long time as if in deep, deep thought or deep, deep sleep.

Through the sounds of the spacebus refueling and reprovisioning, 817 heard faintly the weird moaning and felt cold. The night showed streaks of white dust, as though a moth had brushed its wings against the sky.

The manager stood dreaming.

Even though 817 had expected this, only one thing leashed his impatience—an odd feeling that the manager had died and that snapping at him would collapse him to a handful of dust.

But the manager came to life. A giant step took him outside and he pointed west. 817 saw dimly an opening in the horror of darkness.

"That path will lead you to José."

The way looked no more inviting in the dim light of dawn, when the manager pointed it out again. 817 had slept little. He eyed his bags doubtfully.

"Is it far?"

"It's a good walk. I'll send your bags after you."

817 halted at the opening for a longing look back at the looming mass of the spacebus, then plunged into the woods.

He grew aware of the moaning. It waxed and waned as the windings of the way led him on a sort of paper chase, with pieces of sunlight for scents. Twice the moaning fell away altogether, but each time when he believed it had ended for good it began again. He went on and on. The scents were evanescing and, weary as he was, he spurred shanks' mare on. Night fell. And all at once the moaning grew somewhat louder, nearer.

It came from a large house sitting calmly where the path exploded. A man rested on the porch, his feet on the railing, his mouth to a gleaming object that seemed to be pumping air into his cheeks.

José Jmenuje, he presumed.

Then the man saw 817 and the moaning took a lilting turn, as if to hasten or at least lighten 817's coming.

817 reined in with a sigh. Soberly he looked the man over. The man took the gleaming instrument from his mouth and the moaning ended. They introduced themselves.

José followed 817's eyes. "A saxophone."

"Oh, yes."

"Don't you think it has a much richer tone here than on Terra?"

"Oh, yes."

"Always wanted to play one when I was young, but some-

how never found the time. I'm making up for it now. I'm carrying athematic composition to its logical conclusion. Not only do I never repeat a melodic phrase within the piece, I play the piece once—and never again."

"Oh, yes?"

"But rest. You've come a long way."

817 sank gratefully. His belly growled.

"Dolo!" José called.

817 heard five quick steps and a smiling female was leaning out of the doorway. She stood frozen in a seeming trance for a good while, then at last thawed out of it.

"Another setting, my dear," José said. "Mr. Naimu is staying."

She nodded, looked at 817 warmly, and withdrew. And from time to time after the meal, while he and José were talking, he glimpsed the smiling female and about a dozen youngsters, all lively—but all statuing every five paces, figures on an urn.

817 caught himself half-surrendering to he didn't know what—the body- and soul-satisfying meal, the pollinated night with a fantastic minaretlike structure thrusting at the sky showing above the trees, or the strong repose of José. He got down to cases.

"My chief doesn't like us to generalize," he found himself confessing, "but I can't help thinking of the Konnehuras of Mirac XII. They hold that the accumulating past depletes the future. You can't convince them time is a never-emptying grail. They're afraid to use it up. And at certain hours all, as one, stop moving—to hold time still. But that has a philosophical root, of course, while—"

"Of course."

"—while what the natives do here has, I understand, a superstitious root."

José smiled, but for a moment 817 thought he saw in José's eyes deep waters as of a never-emptying cup of sorrow. "You understand right." And José began talking.

ONE BY ONE, years ago, the Terrans had abandoned their trading posts here, giving Cernpure III up as a bad job. The natives (not yet superstitious) simply didn't care about Progress. José was the only Terran remaining. He was the only one who had had a hope of making things hum.

His hope was this: If he could sell the natives on *kantui*-lichen he would close a circuit. He would be bartering the *geis*-berry of Cernpure III for the *wiwequi*-seed of Cernpure II, the *wiwequi*-seed of Cernpure

II for the *kantui*-lichen of Cernpure I, and the *kantui*-lichen of Cernpure I for the *geis*-berry of Cernpure III.

On the other hand, there were never enough *geis*-berries to meet the demand; the natives were quite satisfied to raise only enough to meet their own needs.

He had put his digits in one-to-one reciprocal correspondence and considered his twin problems. And after a little the digits had slid and meshed in a self-congratulating handshake.

He told the natives each of them had a soul. And he told them the soul was a frail and faltering thing. Live were his words as he told them of the soul passing through shadowy forests of evil. And they felt the foxfirescent eyes following it, a lone truth braving wolf-packs of lies. And their eyes brimmed, pitying the poor soul toddling along, seeing it so real they almost cried out to warn it of pitfalls besetting it and false paths betraying it.

And seeing them weep he so far forgot himself as to weep too.

But he didn't forget to tell them they needed *kantui*-lichen. It would fortify the soul in its journeying—and give them the incentive to harvest *geis*-berry crops bumper to bumper.

He timed the first harvest close, waiting for the last *geis*-berry to ripen and fall tinkling. A spell of searing weather was upon the land. Unless his yield reached without delay the refrigerating hold of his craft, which was a day's march away, it would spoil. Days were yestering fast.

But the *geis*-berries tintinnabulated their coda in good time.

He quickly rounded up bearers and loaded them down. It was a gladdening sight—the line of melodiously laden bearers tapering xylophonically into the distance.

And his tread expressed the rhythm in his blood as he led off. He marched through the wood counting cadence and his profit. It took a while for him to notice he was marching through the wood all alone.

There was no jangling but that of his nerves, and that was a tocsin. He backtracked, speeding up as he heard the murmuring of natives.

He nearly tripped over the first of the reclining figures. The murmuring ended and they rose. Without a word, he stepped off again through the wood.

As he lifted his foot for the sixth step the burdens stopped chiming. He turned. The bearers were again reclining.

And so it went. Every five paces the bearers sank for a long count. His pleading and threat-

ening moved them, but not physically. They were sorry, they said feelingly. And at last they would emit a sigh and rise and carry on. But every five paces they stopped and reclined.

On the fifth day he could no longer buoy himself up with his dream of profit. He sank down and sponged his brow dejectedly. The air was almost a membrane, a drumhead for the heat to beat upon. They would never make it in time now, even if the bearers were suddenly to change their strange behavior and lope without halting. Already the *geis*-berries had lost their fresh tinkle.

Not that it mattered now, but to still a dully throbbing curiosity, he asked the natives why. Why were they forever taking five?

Why, they told him, they were giving their souls—their poor souls toddling along—time to catch up.

He cursed, though what—them, himself, the breaks, the universe—he didn't know. Not wanting to lose all control in front of them he lit out blindly.

Little by little he quieted and there came to him deep in the woods a kind of peace. And he found his bearings and returned. And he sat with them, giving his soul time to catch up. And he had done so ever since. . . .

817 LOOKED around with a start. José had drawled them into dawn. The minaretlike spire starked against the rising sun. It seemed troublingly familiar.

José said, yawning, "Time we turned in. I'll show you where to bed down."

But 817 was staring at the spire. And in a blinding flash of insight he saw it as the nose of the spacebus. For a moment he couldn't speak, then—

"The spaceport's only a few hundred yards away?"

"Why, yes. But—"

"Blast that manager!" He glanced at his watch. "If I cut across I'll make the 'bus before it takes off—and have time to spare."

And speeding the parting he beelined for the spire.

A moaning followed in his wake. Athematic, indeed! And he smiled as he found himself counterpointing the moaning with the tinkling of *geis*-berries as he brushed past the bushes thronging the wood. The smile deepened. He wouldn't have to suffer through a wait for the next 'bus, after all.

But soon the smile faded. The sounding of *geis*-berries shimmered the air and dizzied the mind and he found it hard to keep the spire steady.

In nearing the spire he saw it less and less for the trees. And then he saw it not at all.

And with it no longer beckoning he grew more wobbly.

All at once he realized he was repeating one run of notes over and over and saw he was bumping his way around and around a *geis*-berry bush. Gravely he shook his head at the bush. Good old José wouldn't like that one. Not at all athematic.

Laughing foolishly, he wondered if he would ever find his way out. He waved a finger at an imaginary native of Cernpure II and said wisely, "I know what you want *geis*-berriesh for, you rashcal."

The airlock was just hissing shut when he burst from the wood and into the gnomon-shadow of the spacebus.

The hissing stopped and a dark face thrust out. "Wanna get cindered? Oh, it's you, Mr. Naimu. Better hurry. We can hold up take-off only five minutes. Got a tight schedule to keep, you know."

He knew. His head cleared fast. He ran across the field.

He ignored the manager's pleasant greeting. "Hand over my bags." Then he unbent and smiled forgivingly. He might even tip the manager a boxtop. Boxtops had become a prized medium of exchange on Earth. Some day the manager might stir himself enough to send for a premium and 817 would be doing his bit to spur trading.

"It's working out all right that you forgot to send them after me."

"Forgot?" The manager glanced at his calendar. "Didn't you pass them? Why, they must be a fifth of the way to José's already."

"HUM. Good. Now the Purists and the Galactic Culture people"—the Chief made a sour face—"will be busy wrangling over means of dealing with *Terran* superstition-seeding."

"Hum. And that leaves the DSX to focus on the *Crevbnod* menace."

"Hum. Remind myself to ask 817 if he's bringing back any *geis*-berries."

He suddenly smiled at himself. He really needed nothing of the sort. He was already high. Optimism intoxicated him. The DSX was doing its job, even though it had to work with an ever-pursing budget. And after all, this was only 2814 and the deadline of 2828 was a safe way off.

But it wasn't until 2822 that the DSX got any forwarder.

CHAPTER IV

IN 2822, DSX Agent 249 landed on Capella I. He extruded himself and stretched gratefully. He was glad the trip had ended when it did. Any

longer and he might have cracked up. The cramped quarters of his spacejeep cramped soul as well as body. In the last stage of the journey he had experienced a growing morbid fear of the hull closing in even more and wrapping him, like a straitjacket or metallic kimono. He had never hated in his life, but now he found himself hating the *Crevbnod* for cramping Man's economy. In particular he hated the *Crevbnod* for forcing the DSX to whittle to nothing the equipment allowance of its agents and reduce them to claustrophobia-inducing vehicles.

He heard a stirring in the brush and turned to face a group of beings staring at him placidly.

He took them to be members of the ruling class of Capella I and was just introducing himself to them when another being came up and rather fretfully pulled him away and, mumbling about creatures wandering loose and getting mixed in with *shulwijies,* led him out through a gate. He saw by the lettering on it that this was the zoo and he gathered that this curious creature was the keeper.

249 asked the keeper, "Where are you taking me?"

Absently the keeper said, "Don't annoy me. Can't you see I'm busy hunting the cage you got out of?"

Both stopped short. Somewhat shaken, the keeper peered at somewhat shaken 249. 249 managed to get out that he was one Uzmet Shih and belonged not to the zoo, admirable place though it seemed to be, but to the leading genus of Sol III.

The keeper hung on to his words and to him. But finally, frowning as though he hated to part with a seemingly sound specimen of anything, he turned him toward the heart of town and loose.

This ominous beginning left Uzmet feeling a bit out of sorts. But he regained his composure as he followed the open road. Town-ness increasingly smote his senses.

He had to regain his composure all over again once he hit town. Quick to spot a mark, beggars closed in around him, chanting for alms. There was no breaking out of the tightening noose of the mob. And massing behind the beggars, imitating their shambling gait and their supination in expectation of dispensation, came snickering youngsters, whose parents looked on and smiled fondly.

The beggars were a sorry lot, showing signs of suffering from palsy, granular kidney, optic atrophy, and encephalopathy. Their plight moved Uzmet and he doled out what he could.

More came swarming, while those who had already received came back for more. He had to put a stop to this before he ran out of coins and had to dig into his precious boxtops. He had to come out openly.

He had to shout above their dinning. "Sorely afflicted," he said, looking around, "I'm here to help you." It troubled him to see them all at once gaze at him in terror—a superstitious terror that wanned their faces and drew their eyes as round as magic circles. He smiled reassuringly and spoke more softly, and they tilted their heads and leaned forward, italicizing their lending of auricles. "I'll bring you all the healing powers of Man—"

He suspended in surprise. A sibilance was passing through the gathering, which opened out from him like a widening iris. Parents took hold of children and hurried them away. A beggar broke and ran. Others followed. When the dust settled Uzmet was standing alone in the heart of town.

He pondered his mission. Surely all Capella I wasn't benighted and benightmared, surely the officials trusted Man's science?

A mountain of officialdom came to Uzmet where he stood, even before he had a chance to go looking for it. It gratified him to see how reverently the officials examined his credentials, how tremblingly.

But just what, they wondered, by his leave, was his job?

Feeling suddenly benign and whimsical, he told them they might regard him as a sort of public eye.

This enlightened them and they looked meaningly at one another. And two of them came forward and before he divined their aim blindfolded him—as they said, to keep him from dissipating his glance on the world at large or on those not standing in need of its healing power. It was a holy gift and he must not misuse it.

The way they took his figure of speech dumbfounded him. And because of this and because they put it so guilelessly and because he prided himself on being humble, he let them do it and made himself seem to take it with good grace.

The two officials, Axos and Znassos, guided him with their voices, a cappella, taking him, they told him, to the finest suite of the finest hotel.

But all the same, after stumbling along for a time and seeing he could hardly carry out his mission at this hobbling rate and in this stifling state, Uzmet sniffed at the idea. And to the dismay of Axos and Znassos he tore off the blindfold and

found himself at the entrance to the zoo.

Axos and Znassos with some embarrassment apologized for taking a wrong turn. And quarreling with each other over which was to blame and with much show of consulting signs, they and a musing Uzmet wound back into town and up at a hotel. Uzmet was glad they gave him a fair-sized room. He opened the window wide.

Alone in his room, he flopped down on the pallet.

HE WAKENED and listened for what had wakened him. He heard it—a barbaric yawping.

Through the window he could see across the dark town and he barely made out figures moving about in the zoo. Through his Doozy-Wheat spy-ring—he hated to think how many boxtops it had cost but he was glad he had it now—*shulwijies* leaped at him, the telescopic infra-red device picking up their body heat.

They kept lifting their faces to the sky and yawping. Then the moon came up and with a triumphant yawp they quieted.

Uzmet wakened again. It was hours later. The moon had gone. The sky was dark, an altar black with the fires of many burnt offerings.

Shulwijy yawping tore the air. No moon obeyed. And at last *shulwijy* voices gave out, trailing off into silent mourning.

Uzmet wakened a third time. Dawn lay on his eyelids. He listened and heard a breathing other than his own. Slowly he lifted his lids and saw gauzily a hand above his brow and in the hand a point of steel glinting. He opened his eyes wide.

Here was one of yesterday's beggars, attacking his sometime benefactor and would-be healer. He must be—in the classical idiom—plumb loco!

Uzmet's gaze transfixed him. The knife dropped, stabbed the floor, vibrated like a living factorial sign.

The beggar hid his face in his hands. "Don't look at me!"

Uzmet said pityingly, "Tell me why?"

And brokenly from the beggar came, "If you heal me, how shall I beg? If I can't beg, how shall I live?"

Uzmet sought to soothe the beggar, whose name was Xij. Uzmet admitted he had let his feelings over-ride his Chief's admonishing—to locate the roots of superstition and leave to others the rooting out. As for his healing glance, that was wholly a misunderstanding. Xij had nothing to dread.

Xij's blue-gummed smile beggared description. To keep from bursting with gratitude he chose to tell—better yet, show

—what he knew of the beginnings of Capellan superstitions. Uzmet dressed swiftly and went with him.

Axos and Znassos lay in wait outside. They greeted him warmly—if anything, a bit too warmly, what with all the surreptitious prodding and probing accompanying their questions about his well-being.

They would have passed Xij by with only dirty looks but he murmured to them. And Uzmet caught their cries of delight, "Ah, nothing to dread! Nothing to dread!" though Axos and Znassos tried to cover these with clinkings that were if anything too generous. And they waved Uzmet and the beggar fond farewell.

Two corpuscles, Uzmet and Xij oozed away from the heart of town.

Word seemed to have gone out. Snickering youngsters took off after them.

It moved Uzmet that Xij didn't turn on those tormenting him. "It's noble of you not to mind."

"Mind? That's how *I* learned this trade."

They moved on in silence as the dwellings sparsed and the youngsters fell away. As zooness increasingly smote his senses Uzmet tried to ease himself out of Xij's friendly hold. But the hold tightened in token of even firmer friendliness.

Well, he was nearing his spacejeep at the same time. Sanctuary.

They passed through the gate at feeding time. The keeper glanced up from throwing an *alivi* down the maw of a *tebk* and dovetailed gazes with Uzmet. And he raised his voice above the cavernous echoing of the *alivi*'s relishing of the *tebk*'s parasitic growths and said, "Now don't you go getting yourself mixed in with them there *shulwijies.*"

Uzmet, his own gaze searching for his craft, felt following him the keeper's gaze, brimming with longing to take possession of this strange animal.

"What made him say that?" Xij was staring magic circles.

"Why, my craft happened to set down in . . . ah, *that* clump! . . . and I came out among the *shulwijies.*"

"How is it you landed there of all the places on this planet?" Xij let go of molten lead. "You *have* powers!"

"Who wants to harm you?" Uzmet smiled benevolently. His conscience made him add, "Even if it were true, which it isn't, that I have supernatural powers."

Xij disbelievingly averted his face.

Uzmet stole a glance through his spy-ring at his craft.

Through interstices of the foliage the spacejeep showed symptoms of disease. Splotches of ceramic skin lay bare where glaze was missing. Someone had chipped at the thick coating, as if hoping to enter and/or damage the craft. But at the moment the tampering itself and not the why was what mattered.

In his first seething, Uzmet felt tempted to scruple no more. If these Capellans insisted on being serving-men, handing supernatural powers to him on a platter, why scorn the chance to invoke their superstitious fear of these powers to put them in their place?

But the image of his Chief blazed in his mind, reminding that superstition was the enemy. And remorsing at once he turned to Xij.

"Oh, come now, what makes this such a terrifying coincidence?"

"As if you don't know!'

"I don't."

"Really?"

"I swear by— What does one swear by here?"

"One's wen."

"I swear by my wen." His conscience didn't make him add he owned no wen.

"We—ell." And Xij, his wanting to believe overmastering his wanting to be leaving, slowly lowered his guard.

UZMET smiled to himself and turned his attention to the *shulwijies,* who seemed too lethargic to turn theirs to him. They'd make fitting mascots for zombies, he thought.

The keeper came up, staring still at Uzmet.

To swerve the gaze Uzmet said, "They've plumped out amazingly since yesterday. What do you feed them?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Used to try feeding them all kinds of food. They won't touch a thing. Each of them crazier than the others."

Uzmet thought how to translate "You can lead a horse to water—" but it came out a ruin, "Joy horse water water horse need," so he skipped it. Instead he asked, "How do they live? Do they metabolize sunlight? Air?"

"I'm afraid we're not much on physiology," the keeper said. His tone said they were much on a much loftier level.

"Well, where'd they spring from?"

Xij opened his mouth but the keeper forestalled him.

"They came, before my time, with some visiting ship." And from what the keeper went on to say Uzmet gathered that the visitors had hovered here and asked for leave to dump a load of what the Capellans heard

them call *shulwijies*. The beasts were overrunning the visitors' home planet but the visitors were too softhearted to exterminate them and were taking this way of getting shut of them. The Capellans protested: they didn't want the beasts to multiply and overrun *this* planet. The visitors assured them these were all of the same sex. "And I'll have to admit we've never seen them mating. But something's wrong," the keeper said glowering, "because no matter how many of them we sacrifice their number stays the same."

Uzmet frowned. "You sacrifice them?"

Xij had been sulking, as if he felt they were leaving him out of it. Now his eyes brightened and his mouth opened.

"Of course," the keeper said. "I'll get to that after a spell. But first—"

Xij mumbled, "Pish—"

"But first," the keeper said firmly, "let me tell it the way it happened." And he told Uzmet that the visitors left behind to repay the Capellans for taking on the beasts a number of amulets—each a leaden circlet with a gem set in it. And the Capellans soon had cause to shout blessings after the visitants. For many of them came down with disease and the visitants had sworn by their wens that the amulets had the power of carrying disease away. The P was to pass an amulet on, letting it make the rounds of the ailing and the possibly ailing until it became saturated with the disease—at which point the amulet would automatically soar out into space.

Uzmet nodded grimly. This was *Crevbnod* doing, all right. Handling meant wear, in time lessening the lead enough for the *tovh* to bear it away. And handling kept the vicious circling bullroaring on, for lead rubbing off on the hands contaminated food and led to poisoning—ay, and to the need for more rubbing of amulets.

The whole thing would've ended when the amulets ran out, for though the Capellans were able to mine lead and fashion new circlets they couldn't replace the gems. But someone said that there might be another way: what might not go up might well go down. And that was where the *shulwijies* came in.

And here the keeper broke off and glared at Xij.

Pretending not to notice that he was drawing the notice of others with the clinking, Xij counted out a number of coins. He crossed to a slot machine that Uzmet only now saw and fed it. It regurgitated a small pig of lead.

He hefted it and scowled.

"Making them smaller and smaller."

"You know our lead is petering out," the keeper said reprovingly. "Well, I suppose you want a *shulwijy?*"

Xij opened his mouth. Without waiting for an answer the keeper entered the high-fenced enclosure and took hold of a *shulwijy.* He was too dim-sighted to make head or tail of the beast at first and had a time leading it out.

Xij took it over. He held out the pig. "Here," he said ungraciously.

The keeper took the pig and rubbed it, though he asided to Uzmet that he couldn't say how much good it really did. Disease still saddled them—he himself had a touch of it, and just glance at that beggar . . . But you had to agree the miraculous maintaining of the *shulwijy* count was a sure sign of *something.*

Xij hopped impatiently, jingling, until the keeper finally handed back the little ingot. Then he motioned to Uzmet and started off, the *shulwijy* plodding until he gadded it into eagerness with the pig.

When they were out of earshot of the keeper, though Uzmet's back still felt within eyeshot, Xij said sullenly, "I was going to tell you all that."

"Goes without saying," Uzmet said soothingly. "But you didn't let him tell me what part the *shulwijy* plays in your super—your beliefs."

Xij smiled reminiscently. He grew blithe. "Better mind your footing. You can trip and—"

Endorsing which, the going toughened as the town taffied out that road they trod. The sun poised its glint overhead when they came to a hole in the ground, seemingly augered to infinity. A phalanx of Capellans waited at the rim. Their dull eyes gleamed when they saw the lead, and they togethered around Xij. Tremblingly each of them fondled the lead.

The *shulwijy* turned its eyes trustingly on Xij as he manipulated the pig into a horseshoe-shaped collar and fitted it around the beast's jowls.

Xij patted the *shulwijy* lovingly. And it was heart-breakingly clear to Uzmet that there was something worth saving in Xij's people and—he silently defied the image of his Chief—if he could work to that end he would. Xij gave the beast another pat, one that put it into the pit.

After long long listening, a hollow *barathrum!* of bethudded beast.

The watching Capellans sighed up a breeze, then turned and dotted the landscape back toward town.

TRYING to contain himself, Uzmet said, "The lead would have fallen of its own weight. Why did you shove the *shulwijy* too?"

Xij explained it away. The *shulwijy* had to go—partly as a magical ingredient because of its visitant associations, partly as ballast (though after what Uzmet had just said it seemed a rather weak reason), but mostly as the first flesh to sop up any disease that might seep out of the lead.

"Why did you take of your few coins and buy that pig of lead, and why if you fear healing did you handle it?"

Xij said weightily, "One must do as most do." He made sure they were alone and smiled scapegraciously. "Besides, they reward such doings many times over. And as for the handling—" and in grandiloquent silence he peeled off transparent gloves: "A trick of the trade."

A floating kidney of a cloud cast its shadow over them and Xij suddenly shivered. He gazed townward and said, "We'd better get indoors before it rains. Are you coming?"

Uzmet hesitated.

"To tell the truth," Xij said, "I want to get back before darkness falls and the howling of the *shulwijies* for their missing begins. Our wise ones say the howling makes the spirit of the missing materialize and that is the way the *shulwijies* maintain their numbers. Strange tracks appear and disappear along this road, as if the lost *shulwijy* was materializing by halves. No one goes wandering when the *shulwijies* howl."

"All the same, I think I'll stay a while."

Xij opened his mouth, shut it, shook his head, and left.

He was a dot when Uzmet forced himself to focus his spyring upon the *shulwijy*'s remains. What he saw astonished him.

The beast was whole and sound. The last of the lead was vanishing into its mouth. It stood ruminating and spitting out impurities.

And Uzmet saw as in a lightning flash a vision of *shulwijies* chomping the glaze of his craft—the *lead* glaze, extra nutritious, no doubt, with the cosmic radiation that had altered its properties.

Drops puddled a great grayness around him and wrinkled it as if they were dark thoughts. He zipped up and waited. The rain stopped and clammy darkness closed down. Then from pit and zoo yawping reached him, ending on a note of triumph as the moon rose.

The *shulwijy* moved. It leaped from one thin ledge to a

higher until it was out of the pit. And leaving groups of imprints—hind feet before forefeet—far apart, it bounded amazingly away.

Uzmet sloshed after it for a moment, then followed it with the spy-ring. At the zoo, with a lazy liquid motion, it lifted lightly over the high enclosure. Uzmet pitted his feet against the mud.

The moon was long gone and the *shulwijjes* were at their yawping again when Uzmet reached the zoo and broke in. His craft opened to his coded tapping. Its innards were intact. He grabbed a crowbar and braved the *shulwijy* din.

He jimmied the vending machine and stowed all but one pig of lead in his craft. That one he used to lure a still yawping *shulwijy* aboard. He gave thanks that its drooling oiled its hoarseness.

It was dawning when he squeezed out to shoo the other *shulwijjes* away. He was ready to blast off. But he hesitated to squeeze inside again. It was crowded in there. Altogether too crowded. With a sinking heart he remembered the journey in. The journey out would be twice as bad. Could he take it?

He broke out in a sweat. The keeper, not seeing the gate was open, was trying to unlock it and let in Axos and Znassos and Xij. Xij saw Uzmet and hailed him.

With a *shulwijy*-class leap Uzmet made it to his craft. Before closing down the hatch he rose to wave farewell. But he saw them closing in and he resumed his seat and zoomed into the curdling Milky Way.

"HUM. Now we're getting somewhere. I feel sorry for Uzmet, of course. But they say he'll get over yawping like a *shulwijy*."

"Hum. That yawping twice a night shows the *shulwijy* is cocked to herald two moons."

"Hum. Don't be so sure. Could be two crossings of one moon."

"Hum. Well, anyway, the labsters have worked out from the *shulwijy*'s body structure the gravitational pull of its native planet, and from its juices the chemical make-up—"

"At one stage of its evolution at least."

"—of its native seas, and from its spectral reactions the type of sun it normally blinked at—Class S."

"Hum. S for Smack. What's the whole of that mnemonic again, the one for remembering the sequence of classes of suns?"

"Hum. Ah. O,B,A,F,G,K,M, R,N,S. 'Oh, Be A Fine Girl, Kiss Me Right Now. Smack!' "

"Harrumph. Well, now we know the what of what we're hunting. Enough time and box-tops and we'll learn the where."

"Hum. Ambiguous, that Smack. Kiss? Or Slap?—Miss Jaxin."

"Yes, sir?"

"Please step into my office."

"Yes, sir."

Click, click, click, click, click.

"Yes, sir?"

"Oh, Be A Fine Girl, Kiss Me Right Now."

Smack!

CHAPTER V

In 2825, Ubrem Ogg, DSX Agent 1999, landed on Eta Normae II and primly picked his way across the pocked landing field. At first he affected not to hear the shrilling of the adrobots.

But one adrobot by its dignifiedly modulated tones caught his ear. Though a competing adrobot was trying to jam its message, it was bravely telling in a stiffly decorous style the manifold virtues of Ergggerrr's Custom Tailoring.

Yes, it would be fitting, Ogg thought, before going about his sizing up of *Crevbnod* sowing on this planet, to buy a suit of native weave and cut. It would make him stand out less.

And disdainfully ignoring the cajoling and threatening of the competing adrobot, which to judge by its coarse manner obviously represented an inferior product, he stepped into Ergggerrr's adrobot. Armor closed around him and he gazed boredly through a slit at monotonously streaking landscape.

A sudden jolt shivered the landscape. The adrobot of the rival outfit had overtaken them and was trying to hijack Ogg. In the ensuing running battle Ergggerrr's adrobot sustained several more jarring hits. But it gave as good as it got and in the end sent the foe limping away.

Then it rattled into a friendly service station to replace a missing screw. A mechrobot turned screws on a lathe until it came up with one that would fit snugly. And then the adrobot was again rolling smoothly, the mechrobot looking after it neon with satisfaction.

There was no more trouble; the adrobot delivered Ogg safely. With a series of flourishes the master tailor himself, Narlebb Ergggerrr, produced a ball of twine, laid off the distance from the Adam's apple of Ogg to the belly button of Ogg, snipped the twine, scribbled upon a tag, and with another bit of string tied the tag to the length he had snipped. Meanwhile his apprentices were following suit and in no time at

all a string of strings representing the saliences of Ogg's anatomy fluttered off to the cutting room. And soon Ogg was trying on the suit.

Through the apprentices' mistaking several of the pieces of string tying the tags to the pieces of string that were measurements, for the pieces of string that were measurements, he was in at one ear and out at one elbow. Still, as that sort of thing seemed to be the prevailing style, he wasn't too embarrassingly aware of standing out, and he paid up and left, sure it was worth every hard-earned boxtop it cost.

The blare and glare of traffic told him what the main line of work was. All sorts of charlatans were availing themselves of adrobots. "More quacks than Macdonald's farm," Ogg muttered, or thought he muttered—in the blasting that was going on he couldn't be sure.

His new suit would have made him look inconspicuous enough if he were moving in a throng. But he had the walk almost to himself. He halted. It sounded as if somewhere a bomb had gone off.

He stopped wondering how far away it was. There was peril nearer at hand. He moved as fast as was in keeping with the maintaining of his dignity. It wasn't quite fast enough. He got out of adrobot crossfire and away with a whole skin, but a stray shot burned away part of his suit.

He would have to repair to Ergggerrr's. He strode rapidly back toward the shop, his cheeks flaming though he felt a breeze.

He stopped in shocked dismay.

There was no Ergggerrr's. An explosion had gutted the shop. In the smoking débris stood Ergggerrr, his hands wringing sweat. Apprentices moved around in varying degrees of daze, picking up charred shreds of cloth and carefully putting them down again. An old assistant was running madly about, whipping string from place to place, measuring distances on the air.

Ergggerrr at length managed to concentrate on what Ogg, with a great summoning of patience, was saying. But he indicated the shreds and shrugged. He said unfeelingly, "You'll have to wait until we raid Their warehouse."

Ogg inflated dangerously. It was a conspiracy to rob him of his dignity. He glared around at the scene.

Two apprentices were netting the mad assistant. All at once his eyes went sane.

"I'm all right," he said wearily, and he sank to a pile of

rubble. He gazed around and took in Ogg's plight. He hesitated, then reached into an inside pocket. There sounded a fusillade of crackling that made everyone else duck. His ancient hand drew out a coeval parchment. He unfolded it, making another fusillade, and regarded it for a moment. His eyes streamed silver threads. Then he held it out to Ergggerr. "You might make do with this," he said in a shaking voice.

Ergggerrr frowned at the curlicues covering it.

Ogg said quickly, "I don't care whether the design matches exactly so long as it does the job."

Ergggerrr seemed disappointed in Ogg. But he shrugged and waved the piece to an apprentice, who took it and Ogg's suit and vanished.

Waiting, Ogg poked morosely at the litter. His probing brought to light a painting.

Ergggerr seized it with a glad cry and sank to his knees. "His Highness," he breathed, and he gently wiped it.

"Your ruler?" Ogg stared at the subject of the painting. "Odd shape his head has." Quite conspicuous.

"A *nice* shape." Ergggerrr swung his body between the painting and Ogg.

"That's what I meant. I never saw a head with such a nice long peak." Much too conspicuous to be in good taste.

"Really?" Ergggerrr brought the painting around again. "Yes, our Director was one of the first heads of state to come to a point and I believe he still holds the record. Ah, yes, it takes me way back. I can remember seeing 'casts of His Highness squirming in his crib, his tiny fists reaching up to his crown—a gilded circlet with a strange flashing stone. And I can recall marveling at the tides of the throbbing fontanel and wondering at the first beginnings of the peaking at the bregma. Ah, the changes I've seen! No more mass producing! Everything custom built! Some have seen better days, so they say." He nodded at the ancient assistant, who was sitting silently amid the rubble as if reminiscing. "But these times suit me." He broke off as an apprentice returned bearing Ogg's outfit. "Ah, we've mended it, I see, and it looks as good as new, if I say so myself."

Ogg hastily donned it and gratefully paid up. As he stepped self-possessedly out through what would have been the door an adrobot streaked past, greeting him with a burst of humiliating laughter. "An Ergggerrr suit! Ergggerrr suits are lousy suits!" Ogg reddened and stepped hurriedly back inside.

At Ogg's distraught urging, Ergggerrr kindly put off the raid he and his helpers were planning, so the Ergggerrr adrobot might deliver Ogg to the landing field.

"I WARN you, Ogg, I'm taping this in case I have to bring you up on charges."

"Yes, Chief. Quite proper, Chief."

"Hum. Now why did you end your mission before you even began it? You know how few we are and how big the job is. Ogg, I was counting on you."

"Sorry to let the DSX down, sir. But it was quite impossible for me to stay there and maintain my dignity. Sir, I hope you understand I wasn't thinking of myself as an individual. I was thinking of myself as representing Man."

"Do *you* understand that Time is breathing down Man's neck? Everywhere we keep running into dead ends. And here, just when you had a promising lead—I'm talking about that crown jewel; it sounds to me like a *tovh*—you had to abandon it. And why? Because you were afraid of bruising your feelings! Ogg, Ogg, Ogg! Hum. But recriminating gets us nowhere. Isn't there anything—*anything*—you can add?"

"Only that the place is swarming with those who fatten on superstition. More adrobots huckster for the pseudo-sciences than for any other sort of product or service. Phrenologists head the list. This one is 'by appointment to' one Director, that one is 'by appointment to' another Director. Every court has its Royal Phrenologist to keep tab on the Heir Apparent's pate and let the Royal Bureau of Standards know when it reaches its peak."

"Hum. . . . I'm waiting."

"Sir, I've told you all I know."

"Hum."

"I'm sorry, sir, to have to say I didn't stay to find out more. But that place is too much for me. I'd rather face a firing squad."

"Hum. Stand up and turn around."

"Y-yes, sir."

Crackle, crackle.

"Hum. Move it over in front of the decoder."

"Yes, *sir!*"

Crackle, crackle, crackle.

"Hum. Better bend over a bit."

Crackle.

"Hum. Now don't stir. I'm turning on the scanner. . . . Hum. Nothing. Ah, well. You can straight—"

"PLEASE FORGIVE DELAY. HAD TO ORIENT TO UPSIDE-DOWN READING MATTER. WILL NOW BEGIN TO TRANSLATE—"

"Hold it, Ogg!"

"—MESSAGE.

"NEWS FORMAT. MASTHEAD READS QUOTE THESE TIMES UNQUOTE. ITEM READS QUOTE GVIZFUZ CITY COMMA FIVE-OH-FOURDAY COMMA TWENTY-EIGHT-OH-ONE PERIOD PRESS RELEASE FROM SPACE VISITORS COLON QUOTE WE ARE HAPPY TO ANSWER YOUR MANY KIND REQUESTS AND TELL YOU WHAT WE THINK OF YOUR CULTURE PERIOD BUT FIRST WE WANT TO THANK THE WELCOMING COMMITTEE DASH A TRULY NOBLE GROUP OF GREAT SCIENTISTS DASH FOR SHOWING US ABOUT PERIOD PEACE BE UPON PROFESSORS AVYAFSS COMMA IDGINAA COMMA AND DYBDIVV EXCLAMATION MARK NEW PARAGRAPH WHAT WE HAVE SEEN HAS IMPRESSED US VERY MUCH COMMA BUT NOTHING MORE THAN YOUR STERLING CHARACTER PERIOD YOUR CHARACTER IS SUCH THAT WE KNOW WE WOULD AFFRONT YOU SHOULD WE TRY TO HOLD BACK OUR FEW UNFLATTERING BUT WELL-MEANING WORDS OF ADVICE PERIOD NEW PARAGRAPH IT SEEMS TO US YOU ARE LOSING SIGHT OF THE REAL VALUE OF MEASURE PERIOD NEW PARAGRAPH LET US EXPLAIN PERIOD AT BEST COMMA MEASURE IS AN ALMOST THING PERIOD ABSOLUTE ACCURACY IS IMPOSSIBLE WHEN YOU USE ONE VARIABLE TO MEASURE ANOTHER VARIABLE COMMA ONE THING OF MOVING ATOMS TO MEASURE ANOTHER THING OF MOVING ATOMS PERIOD SO FAR AS YOU PERSIST IN DOING THIS COMMA SO FAR DO YOU LOSE SIGHT OF THE REAL VALUE OF MEASURE PERIOD NEW PARAGRAPH NOW THE EPIT COMMA YOUR BASIC UNIT OF LINEAR MEASURE COMMA DERIVES FROM THAT HEROIC RULER OF OLD COMMA DIRECTOR LHIMNYL ONE COMMA BEING THE GREAT CIRCLE DISTANCE FROM HIS GLABELLA TO HIS LAMBDA PERIOD GENERATIONS OF INTERLOCKING DIRECTORATES HAD PRODUCED BY HIS TIME A STANDARD MODEL DIRECTOR AND THIS HAS SO INURED YOU TO MEASURE AS MEASURE THAT WHEN DIRECTOR LHIMNYL SEVEN GOT CAUGHT IN AN ADROBOT HASSLE YOU DID NOT CHANGE THE UNIT TO CONFORM TO THE NEW CONTOUR OF HIS SKULL PERIOD HEREIN LIES YOUR ERROR PERIOD NEW PARAGRAPH AS A DIRECTOR IN ESSENCE UNIQUELY SYMBOLIZES THE UNITY OF HIS PEOPLE COMMA SO THE UNIT OF MEASURE SHOULD WHILE HE RULES BE THE SIGN OF HIS REIGN COMMA ALL THE MORE SO AS HE RULES MORE BY EXAMPLE THAN BY AUTHORITY PERIOD NEW PARAGRAPH WE FORESEE THAT COMPENSATING FOR SUCH

RENOVATING BY SLOWING DOWN OR SPEEDING UP YOUR HANDLING OF EXISTING MEASURING RODS MAY SEEM EXCRUCIATINGLY UNSATISFYING PERIOD AND WE FORESEE THERE MAY COME TIMES WHEN COMMA HAVING JUST RELATED THE EPIT OF ONE REALM TO THE EPITS OF THE OTHERS COMMA YOU FIND THE INSTALLING OF A NEW RULER FORCES YOU TO BEGIN ALL OVER AGAIN PERIOD BUT YOU WILL NO LONGER FALL UNDER THE SPELL OF THE ILLUSION OF PRECISION PERIOD NEW PARAGRAPH EASY LIES THE HEAD THAT WEARS THE CROWN EXCLAMATION POINT AND AS A MEANS TO THAT END WE ARE METING OUT LIGHTWEIGHT INFANTSIZE CROWNS PERIOD UNQUOTE. END OF MESSAGE."

"Hum. Okay, Ogg, relax."

Crackle.

"Hum. Why would the *Crevbnod* want to foul up the planet's system of measure?"

"Sir, it's merely a way of making mischief."

"Hum. I have a feeling it's more than that. There's something they're trying to cover up. . . . Hum. Take off your pants—"

"Chief!"

"—and turn 'em inside out and hold 'em up to the decoder."

"Yes, *sir!*"

Crackle, crack, crackle.

"ITEM READS QUOTE GVIZFUZ CITY COMMA FIVE-OH-FOURDAY COMMA TWENTY-EIGHT-OH-ONE PERIOD PRESS RELEASE FROM HEAD ASTROPHYSICIST DYBDIVV COLON QUOTE OUR MYSTERIOUS VISITORS FROM SPACE HAVE LET SLIP THAT THEIR SHIP IS ON ITS MAIDEN VOYAGE AND THAT THIS IS ITS FIRST STOPPING PLACE PERIOD I COMMA DYBDIVV COMMA HAVE TAKEN A READING OF THE COSMIC RADIATION THE SHIP HAS PASSED THROUGH DASH OR VICE VERSA PERIOD AND KNOWING THE DISTRIBUTION OF COSMIC RADIATION I HAVE BEEN ABLE TO COMPUTE HOW FAR THE SHIP HAS COME DASH ALMOST EXACTLY TWO HUNDRED PARSECS PERIOD UNQUOTE. END OF MESSAGE."

"Hum. Okay, Ogg, you can set the pants on my desk."

"Yes, sir."

Crackle.

"Hum. The *Crevbnod* press release was calculated to take the play from Dybdivv. That was the immediate effect. The long-range effect they were after was that Dybdivvs to come would give up trying to cope with the firmament in general and with *Crevbnod* origin in particular. When you're dealing with astronomical distances and the smallest unit is off by even a fraction, the whole reckoning becomes meaningless. Hum. Miss Qhepu."

"Yes, sir?"

"Please step into my office."

"Yes, sir."

Click, click, click, click, click.

"Yes, sir?"

"Top priority, top secret. Tell Astromaps to spin Eta Normae II back to 405day, 2801 and at the tip of a 200-parsec sweep out—give or take a parsec—show every Class S star having a Class Y planet. Get on it right away."

"Yes, sir."

Click, click, click, click, click.

"Hum. Fine job, Ogg. Ogg? Where are you?"

"Behind the decoder, sir."

"Hum. You can go now. Well, what are you waiting for?"

"My pants, sir."

"Hum. Here. But first let me take this parchment for the archives."

Rip.

CHAPTER VI

In 2826, Ina Ibohutu, DSX Agent 1995, set careful toes on Nusakan IV. Out of sight, but occulting her mind, was Wyyku I.

Shortly after *Crevbnod* visitation, the Wyykui had begun exchanging dwellings posthaste, everyone moving around in a kind of Brownian jitter to keep his personal nemesis from knowing where to drop in on him. This proved so exhausting that all but realtors were getting ready to call a halt and put out a welcome mat for their nemeses, whatever fearful apparitions they might turn out to be. Then someone—all Wyyku I would have beaten a path to his door had it known where he lived—hit upon a simpler scheme. The Wyykui merely removed their house numbers, wrapped them up, and addressed them to other homes. As all these numbers crossed in the mail, the nemeses must have taken up haunting the dead-letter office, for they have never forwarded themselves.

In the chaos that was Wyyku I, Ina had failed to pick up the *Crevbnod* trail. True, the Chief hadn't blamed her, but she couldn't help feeling she'd made a mistake somewhere along the line. And this with the hands of Time a closing beak. And now a sudden silence as she entered the Nusakani spaceport waiting room nearly unnerved her. Finding she was the cynosure she looked to her bearing to see was she erring in any way.

She appeared to be in order. She glanced about shyly.

It seemed to her the silence grew somewhat menacing. They were watching her, waiting for her to do something. But *what?* Then she remembered that

Nusakanis emit a continuous humming and talk by larding the humming with short and long silences, and she understood they were extending a friendly greeting.

She sighed in relief and intermitted the sigh to return the greeting, and they went back to their humming. She smiled. Somehow they were making her feel at home. And she segued into humming until she could break out the buzzer she had brought for talking with them.

The lodging she found with a family—a mother and the mother's father; the son and the husband were away—was pleasing to her too.

For that matter, the whole atmosphere of the planet was happy-go-lucky to the point of euphoria. Leading an unconventional life appeared to be a convention.

And yet a vague feeling of unease possessed Ina. Trying to pin it down was like trying to snare the shadow of a *pexalt*. She got no closer fix than that vague feeling. And as the days wore on and nothing out of the way happened, and as dreams of clock faces filled her nights, she concluded that because her job required her to trust least what seemed most correct she was mistaking shadow for substance.

And she gathered her belongings and asked Yugbit, the lady of the house, what was owing.

"011 *wulghdske,*" Yugbit said smiling.

Ina stared at her aghast. "011? Haven't you made some mistake?" One *wulghdske* was worth four boxtops.

Yugbit unsmiled. "I've made no mistake."

"But—"

The old grandfather, Vebenpobep, happened to be approaching and in his anxiety to be in on what was going on he broke into a walk. He silenced sharply to gain his breath and Ina's attention.

"Give her the 011 *wulghdske,*" he said, winking.

"But 011 will hardly pay for the food I ate. 110 would be more like it. She forgot her end-around carry."

"Never mind. Give her 011 and let it go at that."

"I don't understand."

"Do it for Yugbit's sake."

"I still don't understand."

Vebenpobep gestured fatalistically. "It's unlucky to admit making a mistake." His manner livened and he began expandandanding on a favorite theme.

Yugbit strode out but Ina listened to the tale though she knew it was likely he was fetching it far from the truth. A wolf tone marred his humming

and she didn't mind in the least how long his say lasted, the silences were so soothing.

ACCORDING to Vebenpobep, at one time a chemachine hunting through all possible jugglings of molecules had come up with a drug. The chemachine proudly announced it as a panacea and leaped into production. But a statmachine proved by extrapolating that the chemachine's statistics made out the drug to be so effective the death rate would fall below zero. And the statmachine scornfully asked if that meant some dead would come to life. This humbled the chemachine. It admitted its mistake and not only destroyed what it had brewed but forbade itself to ever remember the formula.

And that would have been the end of the matter. But at that same time a strange spaceship was hovering in Nusakani skies.

Ina, who had been nodding drowsily, started and nodded most affirmatively for Vebenpobep to go on.

He looked hurt. He needed no encouraging.

He went on, after humming a while to teach her a lesson. A Nusakani reporter, Bledmirkt, saw the stranger he was interviewing stare soulfully into the night as if quivering to be arrowing home. Bledmirkt pneumatically braked his humming. He noted the line of gaze and asked the stranger if the latter's star was one of the—from the Nusakani point of view—formers of the constellation Ghozhus.

A considered hiatus, conveying mockery, was the only answer. Even so, the possibility made good copy and it went to press in a twinkling.

But Bledmirkt hadn't much of a beat, only a slight syncopation before eleven colleagues each reported observing a homesick stranger in an offguard moment. And there was an ancillary catch—each of them reported a different constellation as the target of longing.

At their last press conference the strangers begged the Nusakanis to forgive them. For security reasons they couldn't divulge their true point of origin. But they had simply been unable to resist having a bit of fun with the Nusakanis by seeming to give it away. It was a shock, but for the most part the Nusakanis took the revelation in good part. But Bledmirkt somewhat pompously offered to retract his piece at once, perhaps hoping by doing this to label as mistakes too the flattering things he had said about the strangers.

But the strangers urged him not to. Would he mind a bit of parting advice? Not at all?

Good! Well, then, it was unlucky to be too hasty in admitting a mistake.

Bledmirkt pressed them for a for instance.

They hummed and hawed but finally hinted that had the chemachine not recanted, the statmachine's extrapolation, as strange as it seemed, might really have come about.

The strangers left the Nusakanis brooding over the lost panacea. But the mood soon changed.

To eliminate rivalry, the Nusakanis had later consolidated all computing machines into one—the Factor. All went well for a time; then the Factor showed signs of clashing components. To maintain its integrity, the Factor couldn't admit the outward signs were mistakes. And mindful of the lost panacea, the Nusakanis never questioned the workings of the Factor. In fact, they were grateful to the Factor for making life more interesting.

Take this family. Vebenpobep's son-in-law, Feruflurud, had set out one day on his daily humdrum commuting to a nearby suburb. It would be some time before he came back. The Factor had honored his ticket as one to Nu Delphini IX.

As for Vebenpobep himself, he was taking things easy, having just got over a fatal disease.

"Fatal?" said Ina.

"How can I die when I haven't come into being? The Factor has told me there's no record of my birth."

"I see. And how has the Factor affected your grandson?"

For a moment she wondered what error she had made to throw Vebenpobep back into sullen humming. Then she realized it was the house vibrating. It was trembling to a rhythmic thudding in the street.

The sound stopped before that very house, and she saw troops dismount and each stand straight and stiff beside his spring-bottomed stilt. She trembled. What had she done wrong?

The door opened. There was a high thin humming and a tiny figure in dazzling uniform entered. A tiny frown crossed his tiny brow as he saw Ina. He nodded curtly to Vebenpobep, who stood at attention. Yugbit came into the room and gave a silence of surprise.

She rushed to meet the newcomer. She picked him up and hugged him. Then she held him out and looked him over.

"Another star!" she said and shook him fondly. Medals jangled. "And more of those things!"

"Put me down!"

Yugbit almost dropped him in her haste to obey.

Ina turned to Vebenpobep and hushed, "Who's he?"

Vebenpobep hushed back, "Usvemk-Kiluca. My grandson. Last year the Factor ordered him to active duty. Yugbit was only just weaning him. But of course it was no use arguing."

"I must rush," Usvemk-Kiluca was saying more kindly. "I don't want to keep my troops waiting. I just stopped by on the way to maneuvers."

And in a moment the house was vibrating to the army's pogoing away.

Ina wound up her secret mission by laying hands on copies of the contemporary pieces about the strangers and then once more she was asking Yugbit what was owing.

"11111001011 *wulghdske,*" Yugbit said smiling.

The buzzer leaped in Ina's digits and she gripped it more firmly to keep from crying out. It was touching that Yugbit had a catch in her voice in time of parting, but after all!

"Here's your 11111001011 *wulghdske,*" Ina said. And she handed 110 *wulghdske* to Yugbit and was on her way before Yugbit could count them and find Ina had made a mistake.

INA leaned across the Chief's desk to hand the Chief a tearsheet. "And here, sir, is a fostat showing a group of *Crevbnod* swimming up to their craft."

The Chief lowered his eyes to the fostat. "Hum. The flight pattern seems strangely familiar. Allowing for the wrying of a differing viewpoint, it has the gestalt of the constellation Casseiopeia."

"Why, of course!" Ina gazed at him warmly. "And now that you mention it, sir, part of Casseiopeia forms part of the Nusakanis' constellation Ghozhus. That's what Bledmirkt caught the first *Crevbnod* pining for."

"Hum. And as soon as the *Crevbnod* realized he'd given it away he told the others to seem to long for different spots."

"I just know you can straighten me out on this, sir. If they were trying so hard to cover up, why did they foolishly give it away by their flight pattern?"

"Hum. They didn't know they were giving it away. Look again at the fostat. The formation is too undisciplined to be deliberate. It must have been a collective Freudian slip."

Ina clapped delightedly, then sobered quickly. "Oh, forgive me, sir, but it's astonishing how you see to the heart of things."

"Harrumph." The Chief got up and moved to a huge ball with flickerings all over its surface and within. "Come over here, Miss Ibohutu, and have a look at this astromap." Ina came

smiling. "This sphere is the 200-parsec sweep out from Eta Normae II as of 405day, 2801. Now, see all those glaring points of light?" Ina had to lean close to him. "Harrumph. Well, those are the Class S stars. We've been eliminating them one by one."

"It must be horribly Time-consuming," Ina said softly.

The Chief laughed shortly. "Know when that job would be done?"

"When, sir?"

They were touching.

"What?"

"When, sir?"

"When what? Oh, yes. In 3104."

"Oh, my!" Her shiver of alarm passed to him. "And the time limit is 2828!"

"Right. And thanks to you" —he spun the ball slowly, peering at the identifying code letters, and at last pointed dramatically to a pinpoint of light —"we'll make it."

Ina gasped. "You mean, sir?"

"Yes," the Chief said very quietly, "this is it."

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS windy and dust swirled across the field. A youthful pilot brushed past, almost throwing the Chief off balance.

The young pilot threw a preoccupied but friendly glance back. "Sorry, pop."

"These fresh kids!" Ina said hotly. She pressed more closely to the Chief.

" 'These fresh kids' are doing Man's job," the Chief said quietly. He put an arm through Ina's. "Come, we'd better move."

They moved to the edge of the field and looked at the waiting space fleet. Somehow the Galactic Council's anti-*Crevbnod* crash program had scraped it together, fitting out each ship with a deathnium projector.

"How does it work?" Ina asked.

She seemed childlike in her wonder and the Chief smiled.

"Hum. Well, you know our labsters found out *tovh* is a biaxial crystal rich in anti-protons. It breaks the law of gravitation. And it reverses entropy —turns matter back to a state where more and more hangs on less and less. The increase of entropy of a system is a moving from a less probable to a more probable configuration. So miracles *were* more likely—the farther back, the likelier. That meant if we could harness *tovh* we could perform miracles. And then the astrophysicist Kontonku Owia came up with the equation $\Psi = \sqrt{\Pi^2 + e^2}$, as one popularizer has put it,

the 'hypotenuse' of the 'triangle' of space generating the 'cone' of time." Ina looked at him admiringly and he forgot that she had majored in math. He went on. "That equation paved the way for the deathnium projector, which transmits *tovh* characteristics to the other elements. It'll be a stereotaxic operation. All those ships will surround Omega Casseiopeia II and zero in the core of the planet." He sighed and fell silent.

"And then?"

"Hum? Well, no one knows for sure. Most of the brains on the project foresee a flooding of the *Crevbnod* by seemingly supernatural phenomena—water freezing over a fire, and the like—a flooding so overwhelming they'll sink into the sort of superstition *they've* seeded."

The take-off siren wailed warning and they moved into the blockhouse. They stood off to one side by themselves.

Ina gazed at the Chief wonderingly. "It's a great day for you—but you don't seem to be enjoying it."

He smiled. "You can get so used to an obstacle that its sudden ending is like the giving way of a prop."

She looked at him searchingly. "No, it's something more than that."

"You're right," he said quietly. "It's a feeling. I haven't worded it yet, but I'll try. It seems to me this is one of those turning points. Man comes upon a strange seed. He doesn't know into what sort of thing it will sprout. Something about it throws a scare into him. But because he's Man he goes ahead and makes it germinate.

"Now here we have *tovh*. We don't really know what we're dealing with, what forces we'll loose. A few of the brains believe that planet may wrench itself out of our space-time matrix. Nearly all its substance—from the animal and vegetable life fuzzing its surface to the core itself—would vanish. Nearly all. Remains to be seen if wraiths of *Crevbnod* would be going on about their business on a ghost of a globe, haunting the old orbit and making that sector of space tabu. Hum. Let's talk of something else."

She pressed his arm sympathetically. Her eyes marveled at him. "All right, how do you remember and piece together so many things?"

He smiled. "Sometimes mnemonic devices help. For instance, 'Oh, Be A Fine Girl, Kiss Me Right Now—' "

Jet tattooing drowned out the sound of the kiss.

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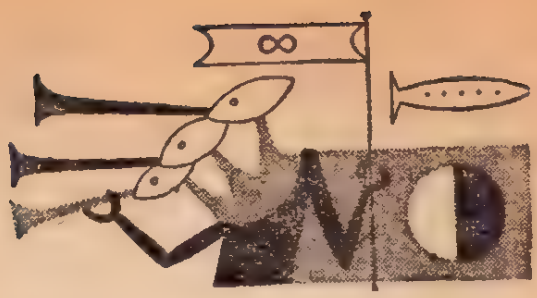
Fanfare



LIVE WITH MONSTERS

by ERIC NEEDHAM

Whenever something of suitable quality can be found, INFINITY *will reprint an item from a "fanzine"—one of the amateur journals published as a hobby by the more enthusiastic devotees of science fiction. "Life with Monsters" originally appeared in* NOW AND THEN, *published "by the Founder Members, Harry Turner and Eric Needham, for the edification and bewilderment of members and associates of the Romiley Fan Veterans & Scottish Dancing Society, from 10 Carlton Avenue, Romiley, England.*

FROM their fur-lined factory in the heart of the country the great firm of Widower's Inc. sent me a telegram and six drums of their High-Velocity Hair Restorer. "FIND IMMEDIATE USE FOR NEW HAIR RESTORER—URGENT" ran the cryptic message. Curiously I removed the lid of one drum to find inside a luxuriant mass of hair, but not a trace of Hair Restorer. Puzzled, I cut down the seam of the drum with a can-opener, opened it out flat, and realized the true nature of the problem—the hair was growing from the surface of the metal. All the remaining drums were the same, until finally I stood surrounded by opened-out metal drums.

This, I realized as I hacksawed the drums to shape, was a golden opportunity. As I assembled the hair-grown metal plates into a steel-backed carpet on the bedroom floor I examined the problem. What was wanted was a useful furry adjunct to gracious living—something useful to adults and children alike. Something playful, yet practical. Combing my new carpet smooth I went over the requirements. Something soft and cuddly, yet a beast of burden, a drawer of water, a

hewer of wood, with lots of hair and lovable—why, dammit, that was just an ordinary wife. I pondered on the problems of the innovator as I wrestled the furniture back into place. Something which could move furniture, for instance, yet essentially playful, like a poltergeist. Mmmmh—a hairy poltergeist?

All householders know to their cost that the prices charged by furniture movers are just criminal. Further criminals return to the scene of their crime. Assuming that the flint-hearted furniture movers have souls, maybe their Earth-bound spirits haunt the houses they have ravaged as domestic poltergeists. I wondered where I could lay my hands on such a poltergeist, a cheap one.

In a mangrove swamp in Romiley strange things were happening. A sturdy young sapling took root in the undead body of a hateful vampire entombed deep down in the case of a grandfather clock. As the sapling sprouted, so the bodily substance of the buried vampire became absorbed into the tree, and with it the unholy intelligence and lust for women of the vampire.

The sound of a slow, rhythmic pounding aroused me from slumber. Half asleep I analyzed the unusual sound. It resembled nothing so much as a bulky object weighing about half a ton being raised to a height of eight feet five inches, then dropped, over and over again. Full consciousness returned as I reflected on the fact that my Nuremberg Maiden weighs approximately half a ton, and the ceiling is eight feet five inches high—a circumstance beyond normal probability. I hastily arose, donned my pajamas, and went to investigate.

Opening the living room door, I saw the Nuremberg Maiden rising to the ceiling, with a strange-looking object clinging to it. "Hold it!" I yelled, spreading Algy out as a shock-absorbing mat below my treasured heirloom, and ducked away as the Maiden crashed down again. Angrily I dived at the *thing* and grabbed it. As I held it at arm's length my face dropped as I realized that I had a genuine poltergeist in my hands—*free!* In wild delight I locked it inside the Nuremberg Maiden, dressed, went down to the post office, and wired to Widower's Inc. for further supplies of Hair Restorer.

In the dreamy hamlet of Romiley a puzzled housewife complained bitterly to her adoring husband. "Harry!" said she, "that new tree in the mangrove

swamp—it just made a pass at me!" Her husband looked up and beamed. "Who can blame it?" he asked. Then the grin faded as he realized precisely *which* tree Marion meant. Well he knew it penetrated the heart of a vampire; with pursed lips he speculated on the possibility of being the legal owner of a woman-eating tree.

It was cold in the flat, waiting for the Hair Restorer to arrive. Blue with cold I stuffed up all the gaps and cracks with Algy, and stoked the fire until it roared up the chimney, with no effect. The more heat I poured into the room, the colder it got, and coldest of all was the region around the Nuremberg Maiden. Gloomily I pondered on the energy requirements of a poltergeist, and looked up references to the subject in Charles Fort. Muffled in heavy clothing, swathed in blankets, I became immersed in Fort, reading on to the part dealing with those unfortunate people who were burned to death without even scorching a sheet. I knew that these unfortunates had reversed entropy—they had roasted themselves to death by absorbing heat from their surroundings, while the bed was refrigerated. Appalled, I wondered if the poltergeist also soaked up energy before venturing on its furniture-hurling exploits. Despite its appeal as a possible sales point, it would be mighty cold having one around the house unless thoroughly insulated, which meant it would have to be completely covered with hair. I wished the Hair Restorer would arrive.

"Pots and pans and clothes pegs for rags!" cried the old gypsy woman in the streets of Romiley. "Pots and pans, sir?" she cried to a prospective customer who approached her. "No thank you," said the man. "What I need is advice, and I understand that the Romany people have a knowledge of rare plants and herbs. Would you care to examine a plant in the mangrove swamp up the road?" "Cross my palm with silver, sir," said the old crone. . . .

Harry tottered feebly into the kitchen. White of face he looked at Marion. "It *is* a woman-eating tree. . . ." he breathed.

I met Harry at work, told him of the poltergeist, and learned from him of the woman-eating tree. Sipping a cup of coffee, Harry shook his head over the advisability of confining an energy-absorbing poltergeist in an iron container. "After all," he reasoned, "you can only contain a given amount of energy in a container of

given strength, and, if you recollect, Eric Frank Russell says these things sometimes explode." "What would you do?" I asked. "Should I release a fully-charged poltergeist in my flat to have fun with the place?" "There may be a way of discharging it," was Harry's opinion. "Let's go and see it." Back at the flat, I opened the cover of the Nuremberg Maiden just a crack, and recoiled in horror at the bluely glowing radiant ball of angry energy inside. "Tell me," said Harry, "have poltergeists been known to go nova?" "Not if they were insulated with Hair Restorer," I hazarded, shutting the door. "Let's go to the pub for a real drink."

At the Stock Dove we examined the problem. Should we tear out the tree, and maybe release a vampire on a world already under the threat of a super-poltergeist? Or should we release an energy-drunk poltergeist on a world under the threat of having its women systematically devoured by a vampire-tree? Under the mellow influence of cider we cursed women and poltergeists alike, and wondered what sex the poltergeist was. At this I looked up in hope—there was still the Hair Restorer.

History has many instances of glorious failure. We saved the world, but knew the bitterness of defeat.

How we determined the poltergeist to be a male and discharged it with a van der Graaf generator need not concern us here. How we grew lustrous hair and long eyelashes on the poltergeist, effectively changing its sex, then built up a terrific negative charge in it is no matter for concern. For when we raced to Romiley carrying the poltergeist, insulated by Algy, and hurled the highly charged horror into the waiting arms of the vampire tree, so that a neutralizing bolt of energy ripped up through the tree, destroying the vampire in a whiff of evil, greasy smoke and rendering the poltergeist inert, we knew sad failure.

For once we grew hair all over the poltergeist it was no longer possible to determine its sex. Now sexless, neuter, neutral and harmless—the poltergeist was *useless* for moving furniture.

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BUPO

A mangled corpse held them captive

in that dark tunnel beneath the Earth's

surface—and taught them a lesson

about what freedom really means!

by ALLEN K. LANG

UNDERGROUND MOVEMENT

Illustrated by ENGLE

THE HATCH to the front compartment swung open for the first time. One man came out. He turned at once to make sure that the air-tight door behind him had locked. Satisfied that it had, he turned again to look down the cabin at us. His face showed that insolence we'd learned to know as the uniform of the "Bupo," the State Secret Police.

The man from Bupo walked down the aisle between the passengers toward the rear of the car. He swept his eyes right and left like a suspecting-machine, catching every detail of us on his memory. People leaned toward the walls as he approached, like children shrinking back from a big animal, and relaxed as he went by. He was out of sight in the galley at the rear for a mo-

ment, then was back, carrying a pitcher of water in one hand and the key to the front compartment in the other.

A battering-ram hammered into my belly. I slammed bent, hitting my head against the knees of the man sitting across from me. The capsule shuddered, smearing some obstruction against its outer wall. There was an instant when I weighed nothing. Then my head snapped back with hangman's violence as the capsule bounced forward a few meters. Then we were still. From the shock to the silence was a matter of ten seconds.

I pulled myself up from the floor. Surprisingly, my skeleton still hinged at the joints and nowhere else. The Bupo man was flat in the aisle, bleeding black splotches into the green carpet. He still had hold of a piece of the water-pitcher's handle. I ignored him, while my brain began to push out explanations for this impossible accident.

Something had gotten into the Tube, that slick intestine we'd ridden through under the Andes, below the Matto Grosso, out under the pampas. Something had got in the way of the hundred hurricanes that pushed us. The eyes and ears and un-man-like senses I'd helped build into this five thousand kilometers of metal gut had stopped the pumps. The vacuum inviting our capsule on had filled with air, no longer tugging us to the terminal nest by the Atlantic. We were abandoned, fifteen meters under God-knows-where.

Mrs. Swaine, who knew that I'd helped in the Tube's engineering, turned to me for explanation. "What happened?" she asked. "What did we hit?"

The foreigner across the aisle, Mr. Rhinklav'n, smiled, a curious effect. "A cow on the track, I believe," he said, his voice brassy with the accent of Mars.

"How did a cow get in here?" Anna demanded. She was the girl whose girl-ness had snagged the eyes and riled the hormones of every male in the car.

"The gentleman is joking," I assured Anna. I glanced toward Surgeon-General Raimazan, the man whose knees had hammered my forehead. He was clutching his right forearm, his eyes squeezed shut by pain. "What happened, Doctor?" I demanded, laying my hand on his shoulder.

"Fractured my arm, my ulna. Get my case under the seat. I want to look at him." The doctor nodded toward the Bupo man, who was struggling to sit up. I got out the doctor's bag.

"Morphine?" I asked, finding it.

"Codeine, next tray, will be plenty." I dropped three of the pills into Dr. Raimazan's left

hand. He swallowed them without water. I used my newspaper for a splint, rolling it tight and bandaging it to the doctor's forearm. Then I hammocked the arm in a sling made of a triangular bandage. "OK?" I asked.

"You could make a fortune in orthopedics," Dr. Raimazan said. "Let's get our friend out of the aisle." I stepped out and pulled the policeman toward a sitting position. He groaned and opened his eyes. Though he'd fallen into the fragments of the broken pitcher, he'd suffered damage only to his dignity and his lower lip. A line of red dashes below the lip showed where his teeth had bitten through. He shook his head at our offers of tape and antiseptic and struggled to his feet. Holding the key to the front compartment before him like a dagger, he shuffled up there. He unlocked the door. Shouting something violent, he ducked into the compartment and slammed the door behind him.

I LENT my hands to the Surgeon-General's instructions, patching up the cuts and sprains the passengers had gotten. In a moment Miss Barrie, the stewardess, took the bandages out of my hands and finished the job with fewer knots and less adhesive. The passengers sat quiet in the dim light of the capsule, as though afraid that panic might constitute a security-violation. The lovely Anna pouted. Though she was unhurt herself, her precious radio was shattered. It lay under her seat, its antenna snapped like a slender idiot's-neck, its electronic guts spilling from its belly.

"Whatever else happens, we're rid of that puling nuisance," Don Raffe growled, looking at the ex-radio. His mouth settled into creases, a satisfied line between parentheses. He picked up his magazine and leafed through it, to prove himself superior to these chance joltings-about. The lights maliciously dropped till only the bulbs at either end of the aisle were glowing. These died till they were yellow coils, magnifying the dark that fogged us.

In the top tray of my test kit was a flashlight. I broke it out to sweep the light in a quick survey of the car. Anna's eyes squinted at my beam, her mouth loose with fear for a moment, like a drawstring bag. Then she squared off, sat straight, stared defiantly into my light. Without looking down she snapped her purse open and took a tiny automatic pistol from it. She laid this on the seat beside her, out of sight. "I've got a right to defend myself," Anna said, grim as a suffragette. I laughed out loud at this tableau of maidenhood-at-bay. She smoothed her hair back

with both hands, making a double cantilever of her arms to lift her breasts, demonstrating the noble architecture of woman, mocking me. I stopped laughing. I jumped the beam over her to help Miss Barrie break out the emergency lights.

Those lamps were lit, and glowed in the cabin with their chilly blue light. Mrs. Swaime asked of the woman beside her, as though it were an afterthought, "Why did we stop?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Grimm admitted. I knew her. She was the wife of the Minister of Agriculture, a man who'd acquired a reputation for integrity in a government that didn't use the word. "For me the Tube has always been just a link between home and Albert's office at Bahia. I didn't think that link could break."

Miss Barrie was knocking at the door up front. It opened a reluctant inch to show the eye of the Bupo cop. He growled some answer to the stewardess' question, then slammed and relocked his door. Miss Barrie hurried back to me. "A man was pulled out of that compartment," she said. "He unlocked the entry hatch and was blown out into the Tube by cabin pressure."

"Like a beetle blasted off a bush by a garden hose," Don Raffe murmured.

"I expect my baggage is strung out from here to Havana," Anna pouted. "Doesn't the State have regulations to keep prisoners from killing themselves on public property?"

"Suicide?" Mrs. Swaime asked, soft as a prayer.

"Must have been," Don Raffe snapped. He twisted his magazine into a club, underlining his words with thumps against his open palm. "Some weakling not worthy to stand with us in war, he was. A conscientious objector, probably." Don Raffe said "conscientious objector" exactly as he'd have said the name of a sexual perversion. "We're all going to the Capital on the Leader's business. Some of us have been called to the Leader's actual presence." He glowed pride, giving his secret away. "There is no place in the Leader's new society for weaklings. They are better where this one is, underground, dead."

"Many of us are pained by the thought of war," the Martian said. "Not in the pain of weakness, but that of pity for men lost in battle who might have grown strong in peace."

"A peace-monger!" Don Raffe's was the tone of a Puritan finding a red zuchetto under his pastor's hat. "Surely you don't expect our Leader to bear forever the insults of the Yellow Confederacy? Of course," Don Raffe's eyes widened in anticipa-

tion of delicious violence, "you men from Mars are yellow, too." The foreigner, whose skin was in fact the color of lemon-peel, smiled and made no comment.

"I wish you men wouldn't talk so much about war," Mrs. Swaime broke in. "Talking about ugly things just helps them to happen. Rafiel, my boy, is in the Continental Guard. He says we'll have no war. He says that the Confederacy is too afraid of our airpower to risk a war. Rafiel is a flier."

"Of course," Don Raffe smiled, his smile not reaching up to his eyes. "The Yellow Confederacy is so afraid of our flying defenders that we're forced to travel like moles, so as not to confuse our own radar guns. Our skies are closed to us. Everything that flies across two continents, from Tierra del Fuego to Medicine Hat, is shot from the air as an enemy. We must take to these caves for a ten-hour trip. Ten hours for a capsule to be blown from Bogota to the coast, a trip a rocket could clip off in minutes! That's why our leader will take us to war, to get back the freedom of our own blue skies." Don Raffe finished, a little breathless.

"I wonder who the poor man was," Mrs. Swaime said, ignoring him.

Miss Barrie shook her head, wondering the same thing. Without saying anything, she went back to the galley to call a surface station on the capsule's radio-telephone. While she was back there, Miss Barrie took a lamp and peered through the glass window in the rear hatch. She saw what becomes of a man caught between a pistoning capsule and its tube. After being sick, she came to tell us that the surface station had determined that we were just east of the village of Rabanan. My mental map of the route the Tube followed showed Rabanan as a dot fifteen kilometers from the nearest exit hatch. Miss Barrie smiled on courage. "A rescue party will be here before long," she assured the others. "Would anyone care for sandwiches or coffee while we wait?" Her stomach must have cringed at the thought.

"Tea would be nice," Mr. Rhinklav'n volunteered. Then he realized his blunder: tea came from Confederacy countries. "I mean coffee, of course!" he said.

"I'll help you get it ready," Mrs. Grimm said to Miss Barrie.

"Oh, no," the hostess protested, without much conviction in her voice. Mrs. Grimm smiled and led the way back to the galley. In a moment she had the water for our coffee steaming on the chemical burner. The stewardess meanwhile was smearing the current butter-substitute on slivers of bread and arranging

the buttered triangles into Maltese crosses on our plates. Thus Miss Barrie brought us tiffin.

The Martian took his coffee black. He sat looking into it as he sipped, as though apologizing for his alien presence. Mrs. Swaime, more practiced than the rest of us in this art of informal refection, took a slice of bread and a cup of sugar-thick coffee and talked. She steered clear of the grim topics around us, turning her attention instead to Mr. Rhinklav'n, who sparkled back at her like a grateful mirror. "Is this your first visit to Earth?" she asked him.

"No, indeed. I spent several years at your excellent University at Sao Paulo," the yellow man said. "That was some time ago, of course." He refrained from saying just how long ago. The Martian lifespan makes humanity's scant three-score and ten look feeble.

The Surgeon-General asked me quietly, "Why, exactly, are we held here?"

"As long as the body is back there the pumps can't run. Safety devices prevent the capsule from moving so long as there's a foreign body in the Tube." I stopped, suddenly aware of my clumsy, accidental pun.

"All right," Dr. Raimazan said. "We'll have to move the corpse into the capsule, and take it to Bahia with us."

"It will be the worst sort of job," I said.

"If the repair crew takes more than a day, we're in for trouble anyway." He was right. This was February, our hottest month. "You have a strong stomach?" he asked.

"No." I hurried forward to tell Miss Barrie of our decision. She gave us a lamp and a blanket, and phoned the surface to tell them what we were doing. The doctor and I locked the airtight door of the galley behind us.

AT THIS end of the capsule there was a second airtight hatch, exactly like that in front, the one the body had hurtled through. At its middle, like a glass navel, was a dial showing the pressure outside. It read 975 millibars. I spun the wheel to unlock the door from its frame, stubbornly resisting the temptation to anticipate through the window, to see what waited us out there. The hatch swung out.

I turned the lamplight on the walls outside. It was bad. The tube was bulged at the top a little way back, like a vein about to rupture. Its surface was smeared with red. It smelled like a place where they slaughter chickens. The body lay about twenty meters back. I took the blanket from Dr. Raimazan and walked back along the slippery shaft, trying

to dull my eyes and nose to what I was about to do. The doctor, one arm trussed to his chest by my crude sling, could lend me only moral support. I looked down at the corpse. One arm had been torn off at the shoulder, and was held to the body by the handcuffs between the wrists. The man had been cut and burned and broken before he'd thrown himself out of the capsule.

I rolled the thing into the blanket and dragged it behind me to the capsule. It took ten minutes for me to force it through the hatch. Inside, we rolled the body under the galley sink, then washed our shoes and ourselves. We dogged the hatch shut and phoned topside, telling them to let the winds take hold again.

As we made ready to go back into the cabin, the light of my lamp glinted off a bit of metal lying on the floor. It had fallen from our horrible package under the sink. Dr. Raimazan picked it up. He held it near the lamp, examining it. He was going to say something to me when the door to the cabin, which we'd unlocked, burst open. "What in hell's name are you doing?" the Bupo man demanded.

"We've cleared the Tube," I said very softly, shoving before his face the card that showed with my face and fingerprints that I was a Tube Engineer. The Surgeon-General stared at the policeman as though he were something wet and stinking from a swamp.

"Who was the man who jumped from your compartment?" the doctor asked.

"State business!" the Bupo snapped. "Keep your mouth shut!" Too late, he recognized the Surgeon-General's uniform, and became silent.

"Watch your long tongue," Dr. Raimazan growled. "I have an audience with the Leader: you may find yourself envying the poor devil under the sink his blanket." The Bupo, wavering between anger and apology, settled on an attitude of injured dignity. He turned and stalked down the aisle toward his private cabin up front. I followed him with my eyes, memorizing him. In case I should ever meet him again, I wanted to complete wrecking his face where the accident had left off.

The capsule jumped onto its plunger of wind. Only the brilliance of the ceiling lights showed that we were again flashing toward the coast and the Capital. I sat beside the Surgeon-General. "What was it that you picked up back there?" I asked him. He handed me the thing. It was a Medal of Honor. Its ribbon was a scrap of silk, and the medal itself was bent as though it had

been clamped in a vise and hammered. Turning it over, I read the engraved legend through a smear of blood. "To Doctor Noah Raimazan, for devotion to his profession, his people, and his Leader." A curt congratulation, I thought. After a moment I asked, "A brother?"

"My oldest son. He saved hundreds in the ruins of Managua, in the plague that followed the Revolution there." Dr. Raimazan took the medal from me and sat rocking back and forth, staring at the laurel-garnished star in his hand. "Why did they kill him?" he asked.

"It wasn't suicide?"

"It was escape. You saw what they'd done to him, with their little knives, their pliers and electrodes. Noah was a hero, set by Imperial order on a pedestal. He looked directly at the Leader, man to man, his physician. He wasn't as strong as I am, this son of mine. Noah couldn't watch men killed for their ideas, defending his silence with the argument that he was a doctor, set somewhere above grubby politics." Dr. Raimazan's voice was loud enough that anyone in the car who wished could have heard him.

"Your son died for talking plain," I whispered to the doctor.

We sat in silence. The Capital of the Leader of our hemisphere was only an hour away. After a moment the Surgeon-General sat straight. He brushed his uniform with his left hand, and smoothed the sling under his right arm. Then he crossed the aisle to the seat where Anna sat. I stared at him. "Do you mind if I sit beside you?" he smiled down at the girl, as gallant as though they were at a military ball.

"As you wish, General," Anna answered. She was pleased, I saw, that a man with such a uniform and such position should notice her.

The doctor talked to Anna the way a pretty girl expects to be talked to, emphasizing what he was saying by an occasional avuncular pat. After a while, Anna grew a little bored with a playmate who was older than her father. As the car began to slow, caught by resistance coils in the walls of the Tube, I saw the Surgeon-General pat the girl playfully once more, and pick up something she'd laid beside her in the darkness. She didn't notice.

We halted on the shores of the Bay of All Saints, Bahia, the Capital. We saw no more of the Bupo man, since his compartment held the exit hatch. He was out first, scurrying somewhere with the news of Noah Raimazan's suicide, news which would either lift him a notch in his

profession or push his head onto the chopping-block. The rest of us lined up, passed through the front compartment, out onto the platform. The station sparkled like a diamond tiara, glittering with slogans and brass and reminders that we'd reached the greatest city in our half of the world.

A gray sedan stood on the ramp, waiting for those the Leader had singled out for audience. Its door bore those interlocked commas, the yin-yang symbol that the Leader had taken from the enemy to make his cypher. Dr. Raimazan nodded good-bye to me. Accompanied by Don Raffe, he walked over to the Imperial limousine. The Surgeon-General replied to the salutes of the bodyguards with his left hand, turning aside their references to his injury with a grin. The doors slammed shut, and the sedan roared off, carrying Don Raffe and Surgeon-General Raimazan to meet the Leader.

And carrying, under the doctor's sling, the little pistol I'd seen him steal from Anna.

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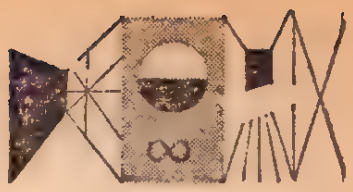
TALES FOR TOMORROW

Next issue, we're going to break a taboo. It's standard editorial practice never to run two stories by the same writer in a single issue of a magazine—or, if two stories by one writer *must* be used, to print one of them under a pseudonym. But we have two excellent short stories by Edward Wellen on hand—each of them beautifully written, and each totally different from the other. We're proud of Wellen, we're glad to be able to present so much of his best work in INFINITY, and it was just too hard to decide which story to run first. So the February issue will contain both: "Utter Silence" and "The Engrammar Age"—and we predict you'll find it almost impossible choosing which one you like best.

The short novel will be "Hunt the Hog of Joe" by Robert Ernest Gilbert, a writer whose rare appearances are always a treat. This one's an action yarn in the best science fiction tradition, loaded with enough satirical overtones to make a mangled corpse of that very tradition! Then there will be "Alone at Last" by Robert Sheckley, and other stories by your favorite writers, with the accent, as always, on entertainment.

Infinity's Choice



by DAMON KNIGHT

In each issue, Mr. Knight will review several new books which he regards as worthy of special consideration.

FORBIDDEN AREA, by Pat Frank (Lippincott, $3.50), is fringe science fiction: it extrapolates our own anxiously armed world only a few years into the future, and postulates nothing that couldn't happen the day after tomorrow. It shows, if not entirely convincingly, at least more than frighteningly enough, how the war nobody wants could almost happen.

The logic of the Eastern powers, as envisioned by a curious group of top-level thinkers called the Intentions of the Enemy Group, is chillingly clear: both sides have achieved "maximum capability" in H-bombs—that is to say, all the bombs necessary; the exact number no longer matters. The imminent perfection of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile by our side will make enemy attack suicidal; therefore if there is to be an attack, it must come now, and must be murderously complete. Launched from submarines, guided missiles with H-warheads could obliterate "65-75 per cent of the largest cities and industrial complexes" in the U. S.; for the rest, it would only be necessary to destroy Strategic Air Command bases the world over. This is unfortunately possible, the Intentions group thinks; there's only one hitch. " '. . . the bases in our southern and southwest states (are) just about as far as you can get from the U. S. S. R. Missiles from submarines may kill the ones close to big cities, but the enemy can't hope to get them all. If only a few survive, the Russians win but they lose.' "

The answer is sabotage. The Intentions group does not like it, and the brass in charge does not believe it, but that is what's happening. Trained to masquerade as Americans, "Stanley Smith" and three other Russians are already enlisted in the U. S. Air Force, carrying out a careful pro-

gram of sabotage and murder designed to throw doubt on SAC's principal striking weapon, the B-99 jet bomber. And the enemy, while the discredited Intentions group howls in the wilderness, is moving to execute the rest of the plan, exactly as they forecast it, down to and including the target date: December 24.

Frank has a nice hand for suspense of various kinds—"Smith's" secret, an American traitor's flight to get away from the bombs he knows are coming, a girl's anxiety about her jet-navigator brother, and so on. The major threat of the story moves with the menace, not of a railway engine but of an iceberg; Frank keeps the book lively by switching from one viewpoint to another, building up a picture of many people going about their daily concerns, reacting in various ways to the imminence of death. (There's a peculiarly gruesome glimpse of two men in a supermarket—one a Central Intelligence man, the other an Iron Curtain embassy official—both stockpiling food for the famine both expect.) The characters, divided off into categories almost as artificial as Philip Wylie's in "Tomorrow!", are much more believable — even Katy Hume, the Hollywood-style girl scientist (who wears horn-rims to conceal her sex). Frank's Air Force background is authentic in feeling and detail, and he seems to know his way around the bewildering maze of official Washington. This isn't a flawless book—the love story, for instance, which starts out promisingly, lapses into conventional coyness about p. 135—but it's the best of its kind we're likely to get this decade.

NERVES, by Lester del Rey. Ballantine, 35¢.

This 1942 *Astounding* novella, revised and expanded, is still essentially the same great story of suspense it was three years before the Smythe Report—and it's still science fiction. Although actual atomic plants have already surpassed del Rey's imaginary one in some respects—particularly in the fields of automation, remote control and monitoring—this story might happen yet.

The 25-year-old National atomics plant in Kimberly, Mo., is under fire both by Congress and by the local citizenry, stirred up almost to mob pitch by a vengeful newspaper owner. In this tense atmosphere, a Congressional investigating committee arrives. A minor accident occurs, increasing the tension: then another, and so on down the inexorable chain to disaster.

Del Rey's wry point: there's an uncertainty principle in human affairs as well as in sub-

atomic ones. When you inspect a delicate operation to see if it's safe—it isn't.

The story is told chiefly from the viewpoint of Doc Ferrel, head of the plant medical department. This device, which provides some high drama, is also one of the book's major faults: keeping the central action of the story invisible, behind the scenes, blurs and muffles a series of events which is none too easy to follow in the first place. Not until a third of the book is gone does del Rey let us see the trouble at first hand: a plant engineer named Jorgenson, buried by radioactive magma when an untried process goes wrong, fights his way to refuge in a lead sample box before he loses consciousness. In this one scene del Rey's muted story explodes with magnificent violence; its fury is enough to make up for all the slowness of the early chapters, and of others yet to come.

Now the main problem is fully developed: in the wrecked converter, what was supposed to be a harmless pest killer has turned into "Isotope R," a substance which in a few hours will break down into "Mahler's Isotope"—and Mahler's is an unimaginably violent explosive.

Jorgenson, the production man, is the only one who might be able to halt the reaction; and Jorgenson, though he has survived in his lead coffin, is in deep shock, his nerves jumping to the random signals of radioactive particles driven through his armor into the flesh. Del Rey delicately suggests that Jorgenson's plight is symbolic: "Probably somewhere well within their grasp there was a solution that was being held back because the nerves of everyone in the plant were blocked by fear. . . ."

Doc Ferrel is a gray figure, like other middle-aged del Rey heroes; the minor characters Jenkins, Nurse Brown, and Ferrel's wife Emma are more vividly sketched in; but Jorgenson, with his eternal caged fury at being the wrong size—"an angry, crippled god in chains"—is as vigorously and unforgettably real as the author himself.

HIGHWAYS IN HIDING (by George O. Smith; Gnome, $3.00) is the year's dumbest-sounding title, and Smith's explanation of it is pretty dumb, too: An underground organization of supermen, with members all over the U. S., has laid a sort of paper-chase trail of state highway markers from Maine to California. If you are driving toward a superman hideout, the fleur-de-lis design of the markers is right side up; if you're going away, it's upside down. To mark a turn-off, one of the three supports of the fleur-de-lis is broken.

The purpose of all this flummery? (a) To lead the hero into discovering the underground's existence, and (b)—apparently—to make it as easy as possible for the opposition group of supermen to wipe up the map with it.

Once you get past this initial nonsense, Smith's plot is fast-moving, the background is creditably detailed, and the story, like Smith himself, is disarmingly cheerful and vigorous. The supermen, both groups, are recovered victims of Mekstrom's Disease, an unpleasant business which either turns you to stone or—if properly t r e a t e d—to super-hard, super-strong flesh. One gang, the Highways In Hiding, are good chaps who want to make everybody into supermen; the others are baddies who want to pick and choose. The hero, Steve Cornell, is the only known carrier of the disease, which otherwise strikes unpredictably. For Cornell, the hassle starts when his fiancee disappears from their wrecked auto, and all concerned join in a conspiracy to pretend she was never there in the first place. The resultant woman-hunt bogs down only occasionally, when Smith becomes hypnotized by his own aimless dialogue.

The story takes place in a world a decade or so away, when the "Rhine Institute" has succeeded in making nearly everybody a telepath or clairvoyant. Nobody, it appears, is both—the world is split into two major classes, with the untalented, the "blanks," an unconsidered third. This background is sketched in with surprising firmness; for instance, Smith has followed the implications of his psionic "dead spots" (necessary for privacy) into a series of ingenious adaptations of house architecture. He has also introduced an unneeded and annoying neologism, the sign "#" used to mark off mental communications, thus: "#You dirty slob,# he thought." Smith uses this device even when a character is thinking to himself, which reduces it to total pointlessness.

In some places the action is as shoddily contrived as Heinlein's worst, and without the peculiar intensity that makes you* believe in Heinlein even when he's bad. Elsewhere, as in the scene when Cornell, newly made a superman, finds he can't use a lead pencil without crushing it to splinters, the story takes on the virtues of first-rate science fiction — sound extrapolation, vividly realized. Smith's insight into his characters' emotions is a lot less superficial than it used to be, too.

Take, for instance, Cornell's description of the meet-

*Or me, anyhow.

ing with his vanished fiancee's parents: "To stand there and watch the tears in the eyes of a woman as she asks you, 'But can't you remember, son?' is a little too much, and I don't care to go into details."

The book is full of such poignant touches; it is also full of cheerful bloopers of all kinds, as when Smith identifies Occam's Razor with "the law of least reaction," or remarks offhandedly that "no culture based on theft, murder, piracy, and pillage has ever survived." In the realm of grammar, Smith's innovations have to be seen to be believed. I don't blame Smith, who has a tin ear, but I do blame Gnome. Sooner or later, as sure as water flows downhill, some earnest soul on a discussion panel, upholding the position that science fiction *is* literature, or at least literate, will have to watch the guy opposite pick up this book and read from the opening page, "I hoped that whomever he was . . ."

THE BRIGHT PHOENIX, by Harold Mead (Ballantine, 35¢) is not an ordinary failure, but a book so solidly built that it falls with a resounding thud. I think the book deserves our respectful interest, not only for its honesty and skill, but for its technical value as a terminus. Bad American s-f novels (and some good ones) tend to be too hasty, too full of action for action's sake. Here is the exact opposite, a novel that fails because it is too slow, too careful, too thorough.

The sense of a limit is a very valuable thing for writers, and a hard one to come by. People who, like me, have been bothered by problems of pace could do worse than to steer midway between "The Bright Phoenix" and, say, James Blish's "Earthman, Come Home."

Mead's hero is a blunt, bearded, bad-tempered man named John Waterville, recently returned from a voyage of exploration to "the Island" (probably England, meaning that the mainland across the ocean would be North America). He is to go again with an advance guard of colonists, eugenically produced supermen and superwomen, to spread civilization in the name of the Human Spirit. The religion of this post-atom-war culture, like its politics, is sanitary, functional, non-violent and essentially nasty. Waterville's sense of this means that he has become morally maladjusted, and ought to turn himself over to the Ministry of Health's thought police for a checkup; his failure to do so means that his maladjustment is serious. How serious, he realizes only when he meets a girl named Jenny, takes out an "A license" with her (permission to cohabit in a state-run house of assigna-

tion for two weeks, renewable for two more) and discovers he wants the impossible—an old-fashioned marriage for love, and for life.

To underline the hopelessness of this desire, Jenny is taken away from him and turned into "a reconditioned" — a brain-washed zombie, one of a class used for menial labor. Later, on the Island, she recovers her mind briefly (and implausibly), only to be killed as she and Waterville are about to escape: this seems excessive. The rest of the story, the gradual collapse and ruin of the colony, and Waterville's adoption by the friendly aborigines, is told at enormous slow length—deadly dull in spite of Mead's good writing and sharp insights.

Mead is an intensely visual writer, but the images in his work are all alike, all smothered in shadow: "Bobbing lanterns emerged from a lighted hut, the legs of those that carried them casting scissor-shadows on the ground. I heard the doors of the van clang open, and by the uncertain lights could tell that a small mass of humanity was emerging from the interior of the vehicle. Occasionally a face was vaguely illuminated, now a pair of bare legs, now an arm. I noticed, briefly outlined by a passing lantern, a squat figure standing with its legs apart, its back toward me . . ." These bright glimpses are dramatic, but in time grow irritating by their very incompleteness. Worse, in spite of the narrative's lagging pace, so much time is taken up by pure word-chewing that none of the characters really comes alive or reveals much of himself; like the faces in one of Mead's half-lit scenes, they are distinguishable but unsubstantial.

Perhaps the central fault of the book, however, is its legacy from Orwell's "1984": when a hero is too overwhelmed by society, too passive, there's no drama. As Walter Kerr says (in "How Not To Write a Play"), "Our instinct for story is aroused whenever we scent difficulty—the hard *choice,* the crippling *alternative,* the threat and the necessity of change." The italics are mine.

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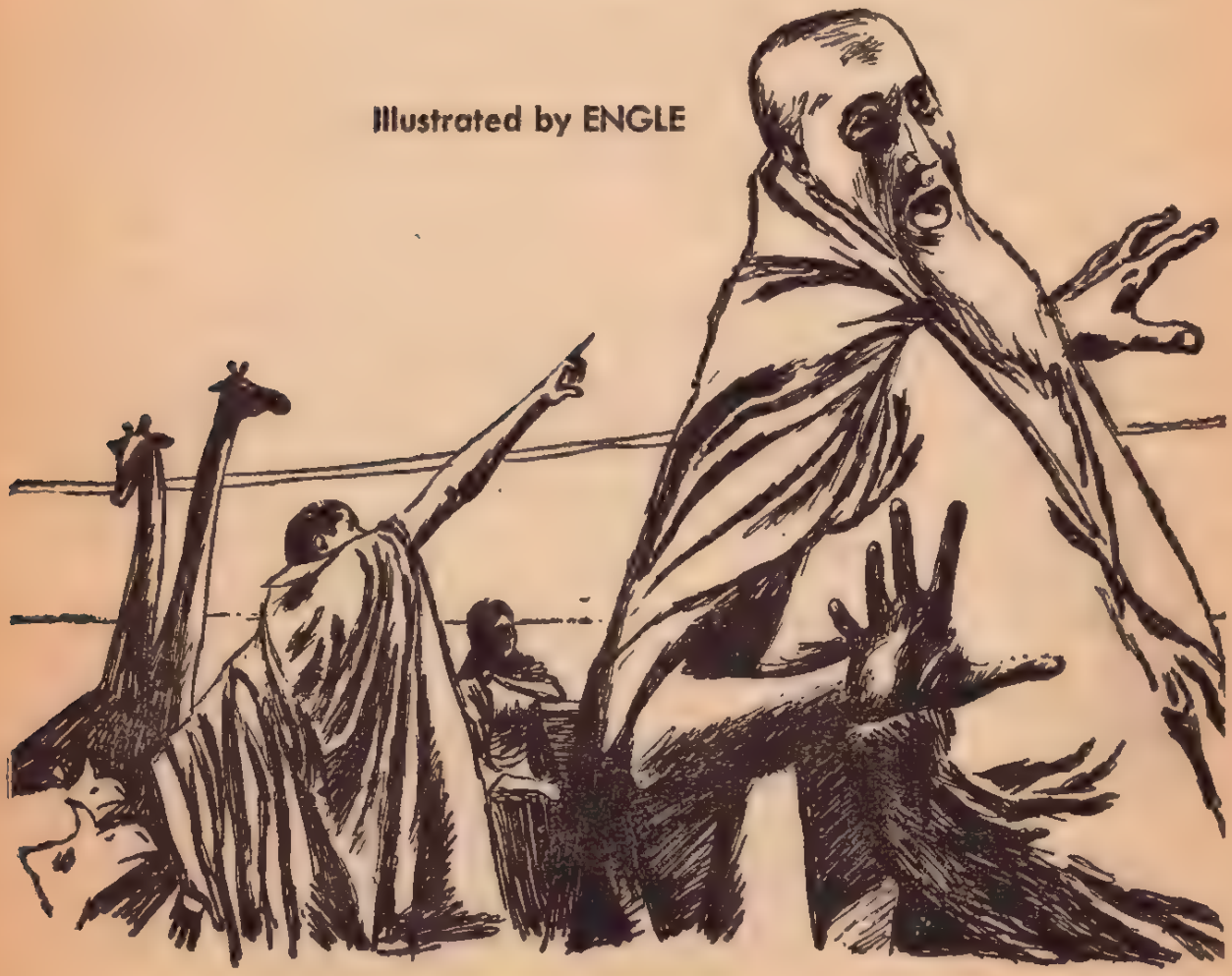
INFINITY has a companion magazine! If you missed the announcement on the inside front cover of this issue, go back and read it now. It contains the best news to hit the science-fiction field in a long time, and you won't want to miss out on the details.

by RICHARD WILSON

THE SONS OF JAPHETH

His duty was clear and simple: strafe Noah's ark and kill every human on it. The tricky part was making sure the animals lived!

Illustrated by ENGLE



PILOT OFFICER Roy Vanjan happened to be spaceborne when the Earth exploded. In that way he escaped the annihilation along with one other man, revered old Dr. Garfield Gar, who was in the space station.

Roy had backed well off in preparation for a mach ten dive on Kabul, which the enemy had lately taken over. He had one small omnibomb left in his racks and Kabul had seemed to be about the right size. But then the

destruction of Earth changed his plans.

He watched, expressionless, as the planet exploded. He shrugged. There was nothing to do now but go see Dr. Gar.

Roy's foescope clamored insistently and he tensed, thinking a spaceborne enemy was on him, but it was only a piece of exploding Earth stumbling by.

Dr. Gar was alone in the space station because all able-bodied men had been called to fight World War V. The governments of Earth, in a rare moment of conscience during the Short Truce, had agreed that Dr. Gar, as the embodiment of all Earthly knowledge, should be protected from harm.

Pilot Officer Roy Vanjan didn't receive as warm a reception from old Dr. Gar as he might have, considering that they were the only two people left. The old man was combing his white beard with his fingers and didn't offer to shake hands.

"Well," said Roy as he defused his bomb and secured his single-seater in the spacelock, "I guess it's all over."

"Scarcely a historic statement," Dr. Gar said, "but it describes the situation."

"If you don't have anything for me to do I'd just as soon have a drink. They usually let me have a stiff one after I complete a mission."

Dr. Gar examined the hard young pilot from under shaggy white eyebrows. "I do have another mission for you but you can have a drink first. Peach brandy is all that's left."

"That'll be fine," Roy said. "I was never particular."

"Then you're my man," Dr. Gar said, giving him a deep look, "because I want you to go back in time and destroy humanity."

"Whatever you say." Roy's training showed. "But if I may comment, wouldn't that be superfluous? Except for you and me the human race is finished. We've achieved our objective." He spoke without irony.

"Never *my* objective."

"I'm not a scholar and I mean no offense," Roy said, "but I believe it was the co-ordinated spacial theory you announced back in '06 that made it possible."

"Misapplication," Dr. Gar said wearily, not wanting to go into it further for such an audience. Though, he thought, he'd never have another. "Come into my study and have your brandy."

"I STILL don't understand," Roy said later. He reached tentatively for the bottle. When the old man made no objection he poured a second stiff one.

"You want me to go back in time and wipe out all human life," Roy said. "I assume you'll

tell me when and where. All right. That would destroy our ancestors and so we'd cease to exist, too. Wouldn't it be simpler to kill ourselves now? That is, if you see no point to our further existence."

Old Dr. Gar watched the other remnant of Earthly life twirl the brandy in the goblet. He looked at the viewscreen. It showed a panorama of rock dust and steam where Earth had been.

"You forget that we have annihilated everything," Dr. Gar said, gazing pensively at the screen. "Mankind, the animals, plant life and the tiny things that creep the earth or swim the waters. Your mission will be more selective."

"Selective? How?"

"You'll destroy man, but the rest will live. They may evolve into something better."

"If you say so, Doctor." Roy's devotion to duty was a well-worn path. "Assuming you have the machine and I can operate it."

"The machine is merely an attachment. It will plug into the instrument panel of your spacecraft. It operates automatically."

"Good enough. You always were a whiz at these things. How far back do I go? And who do I kill?"

"I want you to strafe the Ark, exercising care not to hurt any of the animals," said old Dr. Garfield Gar.

"Noah's Ark?" Pilot Officer Roy Vanjan asked. "You mean during the Flood?"

"Yes. I've computed it exactly. You won't have to worry about getting there at the wrong time."

"You mean after the forty days' rain, so I'll have good visibility. Good-o." He agreed readily and he'd do as the doctor said, of course, but he permitted a trace of skepticism in his inflection and a searching look into his goblet.

"No, not the fortieth day," Dr. Gar said, "but in what we are told was the six hundred and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month. The animals need dry land. I have it all figured out."

"I hope so. I mean I'm sure you have. You're the doctor, of course, but wasn't there some doubt about the accuracy of the old Book? I didn't know you were a fundamentalist."

"Am I not the repository of all human knowledge?" Dr. Gar asked. He was not a bit angry with Roy Vanjan. "Am I not the last best hope? Has not all else failed us?"

"Well, sure—"

"Did not the Noahic Covenant, under which human government was established, fail? Has not Japhetic science been our undoing?"

Roy looked lost. "I'm no scholar, Doctor."

"Agreed. But perhaps you'll grant that I am?" He looked with supreme calm at the young pilot. "I'm your new intelligence officer and you're merely my striking arm. Help yourself to another brandy, son."

"Maybe I'd better not. I don't want to goof the mission."

"There's time. You'll want some sleep first."

"All right. I suppose I'll need a steady hand to murder Noah and the rest."

"And Shem, and Ham, and Japheth, and Noah's wife," said Dr. Gar, "and the three wives of his sons with them, as it was written. Especially Japheth. But not the animals, remember."

"I understand that. If you think the Ten Commandments don't apply. Whichever one of them it was."

"They were an element of the Mosaic Covenant. It, too, failed. Perhaps the Garic Covenant, if I may be so vain, will endure."

THE WATERS covered the Earth.

A moment ago, before he activated the attachment, Pilot Officer Roy Vanjan's spacecraft had been plunging towards the vortex of a ragged ball of dust and vapor, the destroyed Earth of World War V. Now, in the Adamic Year 601 (or was it the Edenic?—he couldn't remember, though Dr. Gar had let him

study the Book), the waters stretched everywhere. Ahead the sun glinted in reflection from something rising above the surface. Ararat?

He made out the twin peaks. He throttled back to scarcely more than mach one and flew over them, high. His second pass took him back along his own vapor trail. This time he spotted the tiny surface craft making for the solitary bit of land. He had to hand it to Dr. Gar. The old boy's space-time grid had hit it right on the button.

Roy was too high to distinguish details but he imagined that Noah and his family would be on deck, full of the wonder of Mount Ararat rising, as promised, from the sea.

But there was another wonder —the vapor trails that stretched for miles across the upper air. Did they, down there on the Ark, think them a sign of the Lord? Roy smiled ironically. They were a sign of the lord Gar and of his servant, Pilot Officer Vanjan, come to blast them into eternity and change the future, to give the animals a chance.

Who would chronicle his role as the re-arranging angel, the unheavenly host about to gather up in violence the drifting souls below? Who, he wondered. Some simian scribe? Some unborn elephant prophet? An insectate scholar destined to evolve from among the creeping things that would inherit the Earth?

Or perhaps the written word would die unborn under the fiery hail of his guns.

No matter. These questions and more had been anticipated by Dr. Gar. Soon now, at the end of Roy's strafing run, it would be up to History to begin assembling the answers.

He slowed to mach minus and sent out wings. He would have to dip close to see if the entire Ark's complement was on deck. The job had to be done right or Earth was kaput. Nothing personal, Noah, old boy.

There they were, on the starboard side of the top deck, well out from under the pitch of the roof, craning their necks for a look at this miracle in the sky where they had expected to see only a returning dove.

"Behold!" Roy cried out. "I bring you tidings! But not the tidings of the dove. I am your lost raven returned—the raven of death! My tidings are of the new future which your descendants will not know and so will not doom."

The frightened upturned faces were far behind and he was talking to himself.

"Hear me, Noah, for I am come to destroy you, and with you your seeds of self-destruction. These are the tidings I bring from the future that has

ceased to exist because you existed—the future that will exist once more when you cease to."

He heeled the spacecraft over and back. No more speeches, he told himself, though he had studied the Book in fascination. He was a killer, not a philosopher.

He would have to make his strafing run low. If he dived on the target his bullets would go into the holds and kill the animals. He roared at the Ark a few feet above the waves.

They were all together in a clump, the eight of them.

Farewell, Noah! he thought as his thumbs pressed on the death-dealing button. Farewell, Noah and Noah's wife!

Farewell, Ham, and Ham's wife and unborn sons—farewell, Canaan, and Cush, and Mizraim, and Phut!

Farewell, Shem! And unborn Elam, and Asshur, and Arphaxad, and Lud, and Aram!

And farewell, Japheth, father of sons of science! Farewell, Gomer, and Magog, and Madai, and Javan, and Tubal, and Meshech, and Tiras!

Farewell, all tribes. Make way for the animal kingdom in the Garic Covenant.

HE HAD MADE three passes and now he zoomed into the sky. He had destroyed humanity and changed the future.

Or had he? He'd be dead, too, if he had, gone like the snap of a finger with the last gasp from the Ark. He had killed his ancestors. He had killed everybody's ancestors, but *he* existed still. Where was the paradox that Dr. Gar had overlooked?

The Ark had drifted closer to the shore. He circled it and counted the lifeless bodies lying in red stains on the gopher wood of the deck. Eight.

Then he noticed the change. The backs of his hands were hairier. His shoes were binding him. When he kicked them off his agile toes curled comfortably around the control pedals. He had a glimpse of a hairy, flat-nosed face reflected in the instrument panel. It laughed and the sound came out a simian yap.

But for all that he was still a sentient being. His control of the spacecraft was as expert as before.

It hadn't worked.

Do you hear, Dr. Gar? he thought. *It's a flop. I goofed the mission. We're all dead, no matter what.*

I give you a new commandment, man who would be God: Thou shalt not tamper with time.

He had changed the future and in the future he himself had been changed, but not enough. Somewhere below in the hold of the Ark were his ancestors who had evolved along a new path in

the new future. The evolution had been slower, perhaps, but it had been as sure, external appearances notwithstanding. Somewhere in the far new future, he was sure, there was a simian Dr. Gar looking down in solitude on the remains of Earth.

The Ark had touched the land. The animals—his fellow creatures—were beginning to go forth, two by two, onto the shore of Ararat.

His foescope set up a clamor. There in the sky was a new thing, a spacecraft like his, yet unlike it. It looked deadlier, more purposeful. Ignoring him, it was diving out of the unknowable future to destroy its own past.

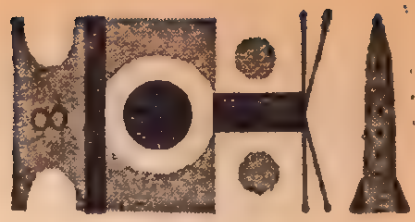
He watched in professional admiration as his fellow pilot screamed unerringly for the Ark in sacrificial completion of the mission he himself had failed to accomplish. Death to the animals, too—from an animal pilot.

He knew then that Earth would not die. It might circle lifeless for eons, waiting to welcome the foot—or paw, or tentacle—of others from outside. But it would be there, intact and serene.

Even as the mountain-shattering explosion came and he himself ceased to exist, he knew.

∞ ∞ ∞

By the editor



13 TO THE NTH POWER

THERE'S plenty of spinach for speculation in Edward Wellen's "The Superstition-Seeders" —and his theme is considerably more complex than it might appear at first hasty inspection.

Science-vs.-superstition is only part of it. Notice how many of the superstitions Wellen describes have scientific roots, and how a thorough investigation of them points the way, in the end, to what promises to be a whole new body of knowledge.

Or choose a wildly hypothetical example. Alchemists failed to transmute lead into gold. But did they fail because the thing was impossible, because they didn't know enough, or because there was a common factor present in each experiment that prevented it from succeeding?

Well, every alchemist kept a black cat around the lab, didn't he? And people have considered black cats unlucky ever since, haven't they?

Maybe they're right. Has anyone ever checked to see if black cats really have an influence over human affairs? Has anyone even considered taking the next logical step, the attempt to measure that influence and find out how it operates?

Sure it's a long shot. And we don't have enough scientists to do the foreseeable work on the odds-on favorite mysteries, so we leave the long shots alone. That makes sense, but it doesn't prove long shots never pay off.

The belief of the average man in scientists today is so strong that it could easily be nudged over the line into superstition. Superstition, that is, can have a scientific basis.

Can a science, contrariwise, have a superstitious basis? We won't know until somebody makes a list of *all* the things that are faithfully believed in by any fraction whatever of Earth's population, and feeds it into a science-fictional giant brain.

The results should be fascinating. —LTS

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Feedback

THIS department is strictly for the readers. Ideas about science fiction in general are as welcome as discussions of INFINITY itself. Keep the letters coming to the Editor, c/o Royal Publications, Inc., 47 E. 44th St., New York 17, N.Y.

∞

I am writing this letter because I am tired of reading careful explanations of why a spaceship cannot travel faster than light at the first of every story about interstellar travel. These explanations are especially boring because they are fallacious. A spaceship *can* travel faster than light, and I shall procede to prove it!

Let us take the mass expansion idea first as it is the most common. Relativity states that when an object (spaceship) is in motion its mass is multiplied by a factor beta. When the velocity equals that of light, beta and thus the mass of the ship is infinity. Thus enough fuel cannot be carried to reach the velocity. This idea contains one flaw. The exhaust mass is also multiplied by beta and, if atomic power is used, so is the reactor's power. The betas cancel when inserted in the formula for acceleration! Therefore mass expansion can be ignored.

The second fallacy is based on relativity's statement that ship time equals Earth time divided by beta. To explode this bubble we send out two ships from the same base with the same acceleration but traveling in opposite directions. After a few weeks they start sending out radio pulses at the rate of one a second (ship time). Since the ships have been traveling for the same time at the same acceleration they are traveling at the same speed. This makes beta the same for both ships and keeps their clocks going at the same speed. But if a person on one ship listens to the time signals from the other the signals seem to occur more slowly than one per second. Therefore the time contraction is merely doppler effect.

We have now eliminated the relativity effects and the only bar to interstellar travel is the size of the fuel tank.

Please publish this letter in your wonderful mag as soon as possible so I can stop reading about relativity effects on spaceships as soon as possible.—Joseph W. Harter 3rd, 170 Kings Park Drive, N. Sacramento, Calif.

(I'm afraid you'll just have to be patient, Mr. Harter. Remember, there was a time when Einstein didn't know anything about relativity either.—Ed.)

∞

My favorites in the fourth INFINITY are Randy Garrett's "Stroke of Genius" and Asimov's "Someday."

"Stroke of Genius" ranks as one of the best sf-mystery combos I've run across. And note that the main character is not, at least in connection with Rejuvenation, "able to understand and manipulate the gadgets." On the other hand, neither can he be fairly classified as merely someone who *doesn't* know how to handle the gadgets. Rather, he represents a type inevitable in any advancing technology: the person whose plans are unexpectedly and completely altered by events over which he has no control.

Asimov deftly used the unique outlook of children to make his point more effectively than he might have with another approach. I'm sorry to say, though, that the ending struck me as simply corny.

I got a kick out of trying to outguess Lord Fiagore in Harlan Ellison's "Trojan Hearse." How about a similar "puzzle-story" in each issue? I wonder if this puzzle aspect might have been a part of that "sense of wonder" everyone's so concerned about.

Your blurb for Mason's "The Fool" actually outshone the story itself, an accomplishment matched only by JWC's for H. B. Fyfe's "In Value Deceived" some years back. "The Beach Where Time Began" was the most disappointing knightale I've yet read. Maybe I'm missing his point.

Your editorial page quietly brought out a number of points deserving of some thought. Offhand, I can't think of a single sf story that gives an attractive answer to your question, What will people do with their increasing amounts of leisure time?

I hope the rumor that you're considering dropping the editorial isn't true. Your relaxed editorial style and the sf content are a pleasant contrast to certain hyper-charged, huckstering or wonders-of-science writings with which others fill their space.

And speaking of huckstering. . . . Due to an unexpected dearth of reviews and plugs, I have on

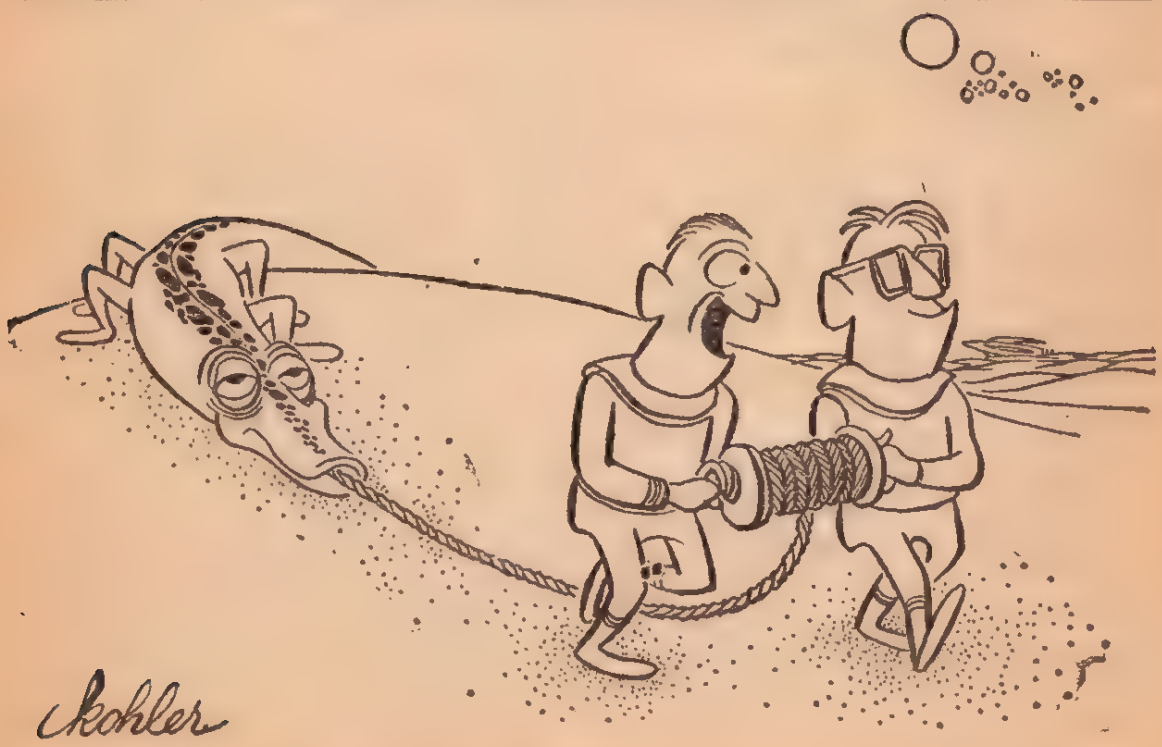
hand a hundred copies of the third and last issue of *my Infinity*. Although the issue's several months old, the contents —including an incisive critique of modern sf by Sam Moskowitz, short stories by Harlan Ellison and Don Cantin, and the only Officially Authorized Autobiography of Calvin Thomas Beck—are in no way out of date. The absence of purely fannish material and presence of a humorous (I hope) history of the fanzine make *Infy* #3 a perfect introduction to fanzines for people who have wondered about the things, but never actually sent for one. Thirty-eight pages, five-color cover and illustrations, hilarious cartoons by Bob Kellogg—15¢ a copy. —Charles Harris, 85 Fairview Ave., Great Neck, N.Y.

(Well worth it, too.—Ed.)

∞

This latest issue—August—was as fine as the other three, and you seem to maintain that all-important balance you mentioned a while back. I think the Garrett, Wellen, Asimov and Knight stories were your best, with the others coming in only slightly behind.

I think the Ellison story was a let-down from "Glow Worm" which was one of my favorites. It seemed to have been written very quickly. As long as I'm on that subject, I thought I might take argument with the letter



"No more getting lost for us, hey, Beckstead?"

from Tom Driscoll in the August issue. "Glow Worm" was a popular story with me, because it posed a very real problem.

It wasn't that Seligman didn't *want* other humans to have his powers, it was just that he knew they *couldn't possibly* have them. It had taken such a group of random factors to change him, he knew nothing like that could happen to others. Yet *he* was like that, and he knew he would be alone for the rest of his life. He was different, and *difference* was what would make people shun him. Even though they would shun him, they would see in him a symbol.

He was alone—probably forever. He didn't care one way or the other whether other people were like him. He knew they *couldn't* be. That was why he was unique.

Sorry to have gone on like this. Just wanted to let you know how much I enjoy the magazine, and to keep them coming.—Leon Miller, 87 Harmon Drive, Painesville, Ohio.

(Thanks—you seem to have pinned down Ellison's intentions precisely.—Ed.)

∞

Recently I bought a copy of INFINITY and found it very refreshing, imaginative and entertaining.

I'm an old science-fiction fan, and it seems to me that the science-fiction magazines cut their own throats by flooding the market with inferior material, though I see a few of the better quality publications are still on the stands.

Do you suppose they really thought science fans would swallow ordinary fiction, science fictionalized by simply sticking in a ray gun or some such device?

In "Feedback" there is a discussion of space warp and hyper space travel. I find such devices very interesting when intelligently used in a story.

The instantaneous matter transmitter, however, would make it possible to accomplish an infinite variety of paradoxical things. For example we could place two of them close together and back halfway into one and find ourselves standing behind our own back. As a super futuristic back scratcher it would be unparalleled.

Or we could place one over the other with a turbine between and pump some water into the lower one and it would continue to circulate, eternally furnishing free power. *(Sure, but it would take power to run the matter transmitters!—Ed.)*

We could wash our own back, kick our own slats, or stand on our own head.

In regards to the racial integration question mentioned in "Feedback," I think that if we are going to force racial integration in all other fields of human activity, that we should also force racial integration in the field of marriage as well.

My true sentiments are that force will cause resentment and only make the situation worse.

Education is the proper answer and it is a slow process. Patience is necessary.

I hope you will print this letter as I am a brand new fan of INFINITY and would like to get my two cents worth in, and will answer anyone who writes me on any questions brought up in "Feedback."—S. G. Dickinson, R.F.D. #1, Bangor, Maine.

∞ ∞ ∞

Jokester

(Continued from page 51)

nightmare! A raving nightmare!"

"What's the answer?" asked Meyerhof. "I want Multivac's remarks, not yours."

"All right. Take it. Multivac states that once even a single human discovers the truth of this method of psychological analysis of the human mind, it will become useless as an objective technique to those extra-terrestrial powers now using it."

"You mean there won't be any more jokes handed out to humanity," asked Trask faintly. "Or what do you mean?"

"No more jokes," said Whistler, *"now!* Multivac says *now!* The experiment is ended *now!* A new technique will have to be introduced."

They stared at each other. The minutes passed.

Meyerhof said, slowly, "Multivac is right."

Whistler said, haggardly, "I know."

Even Trask said in a whisper, "Yes. It must be."

It was Meyerhof who put his finger on the proof of it, Meyerhof the accomplished jokester. He said. "It's over, you know, all over. I've been trying for five minutes now and I can't think of one single joke, not one! And if I read one in a book, I wouldn't laugh. I know."

"The gift of humor is gone," said Trask, drearily. "No man will ever laugh again."

As they remained there, staring, feeling the world shrink down to the dimensions of an experimental rat-cage—with the maze removed and something—*something*—about to be put in its place.

∞ ∞ ∞

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